

15 VAISHNAVA TEMPLES OF TAMILNADU

M. RAJAGOPALAN

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Main Entrance - Tiruvattar



Eastern Tower - Mannargudi

33-1

15 VAISHNAVA TEMPLES OF TAMILNADU

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Sri Venkateswara's figure

HARI OM NAMO NARAYANA

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CONTENTS

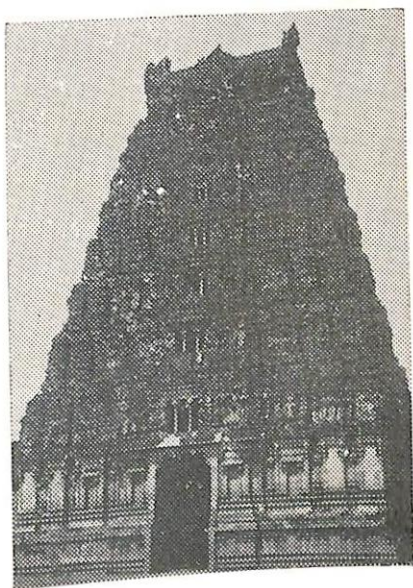
1	MYLAPORE (ADIKESAVA PERUMAL TEMPLE)	25
2	TIRUKOILUR	35
3	TIRUVANDHIPURAM	46
4	TIRUKANNAPURAM	57
5	TIRUCHERAI	66
6	MANNARGUDI	76
7	DENKANIKOTA	89
8	KARAMADAI	96
9	THADICOMBU	105
10	TIRUMOHUR	114
11	MADURAI (KODAL ALAGAR)	119
12	TIRUTHANGAL	129
13	KRISHNAPURAM	144
14	SRIVAIKUNTAM	155
15	TIRUVATTAR	164
16	PHOTOGRAPHS	(5-24)
17	PHOTOGRAPHS	(136-140)



Mylapore



Tirukoilur



Western Tower, Mannargudi



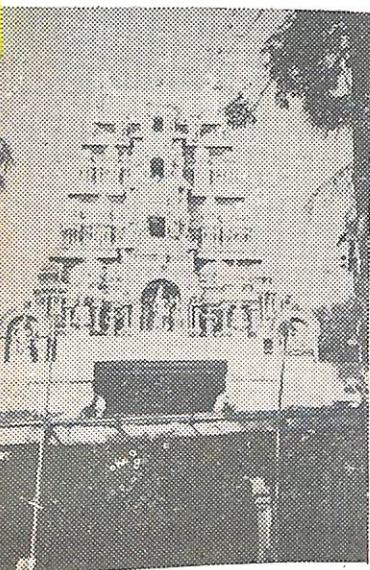
Denkanikota



Tirukannapuram



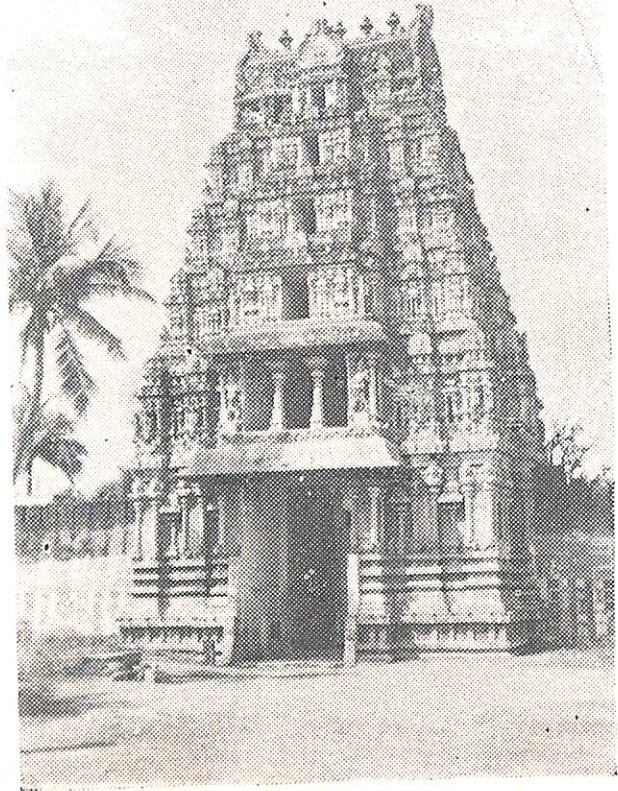
Tiruchennai



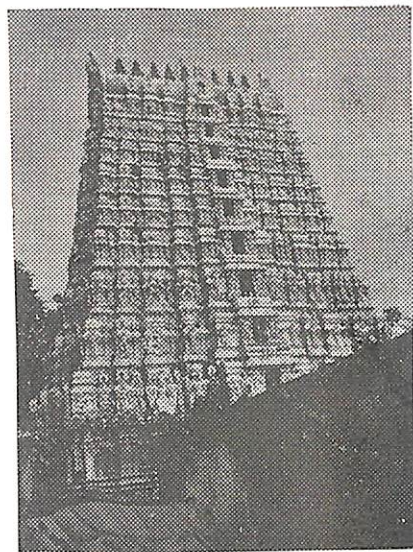
Tirumohur



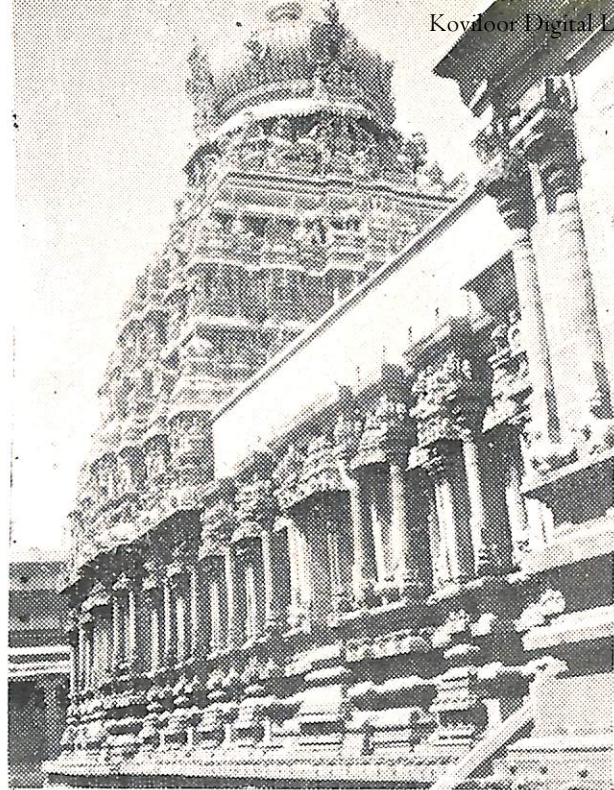
Swarga Vasal
Karamadai



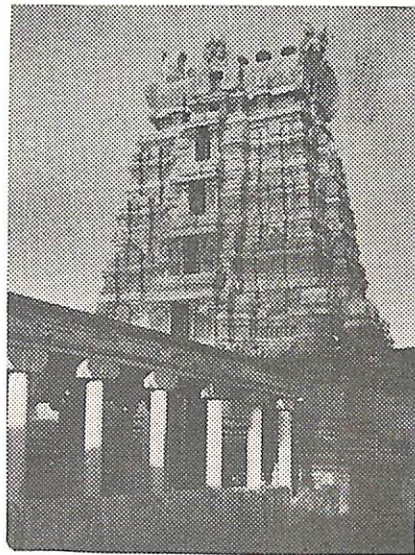
Thadicombu



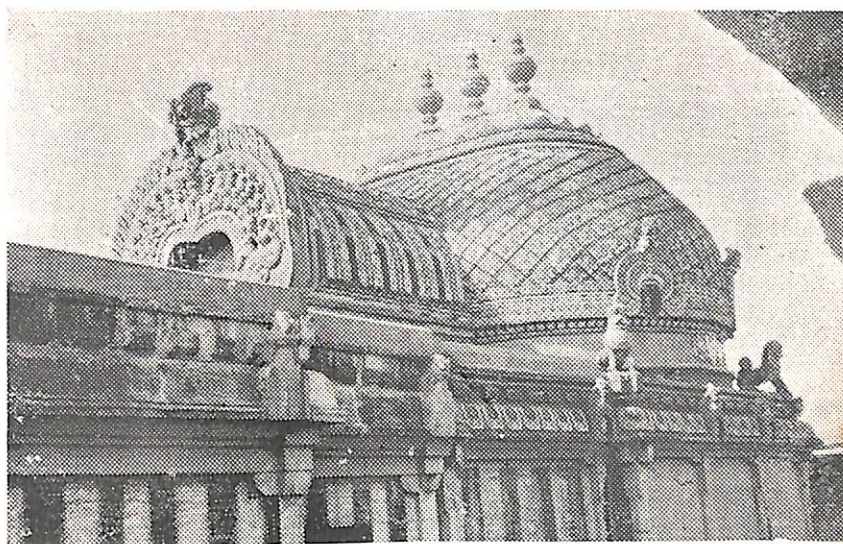
Srivaikuntam



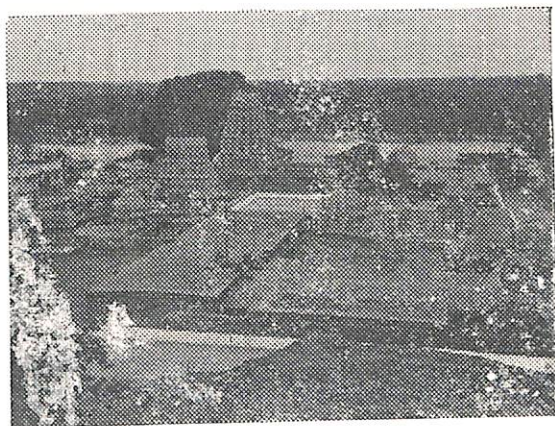
Ashtanga Vimana - Madurai



Krishnapuram

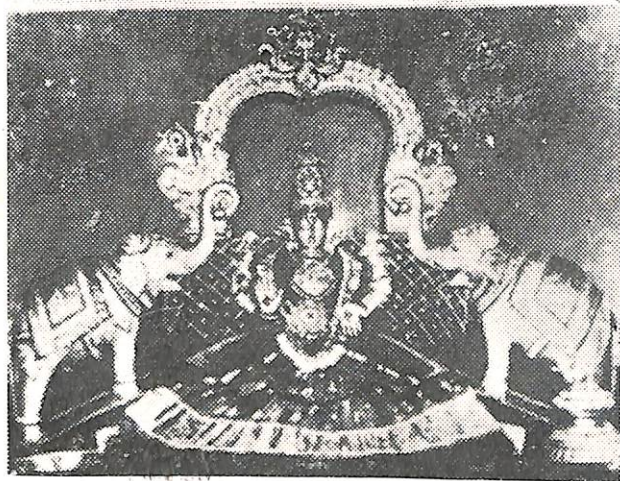


Somachandra Vimana, Tiruthangal

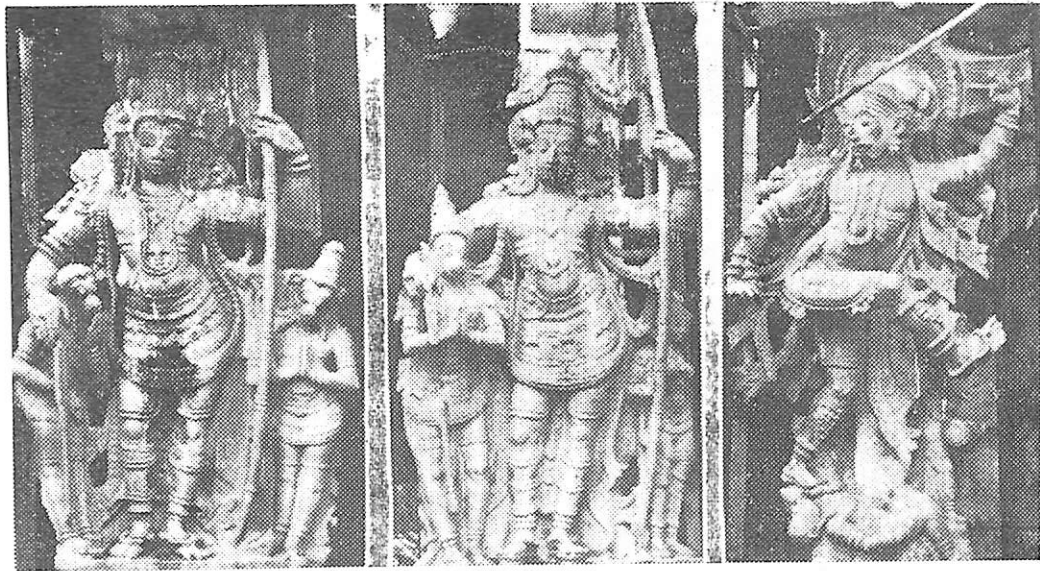


Tiruvandhipuram

Vidya Rajagopalan - Mannargudi



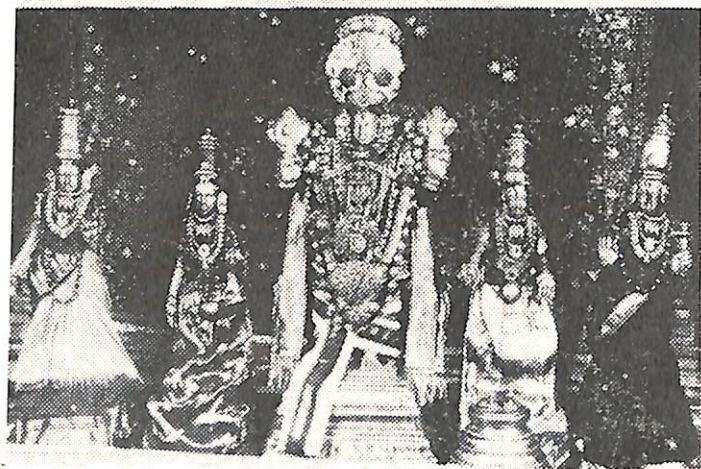
Senkamalavalli - Mannargudi



Rama and Lakshmana
Sri Vaikuntam

Veerabhadra

(Utsavars) - Tirucheraï



(Utsavars) - Tirukannapuram



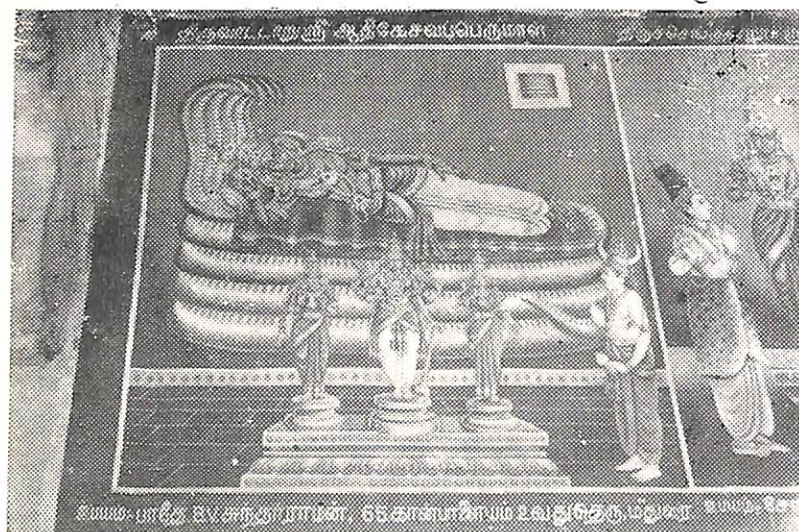
Trivikrama



Poongovil Thayar
Tirukoilur



(Utsavar Main Deity)



Adikesava Perumal - Tiruvattar



Manmatha



Chakkarathalwar
Tirumohur



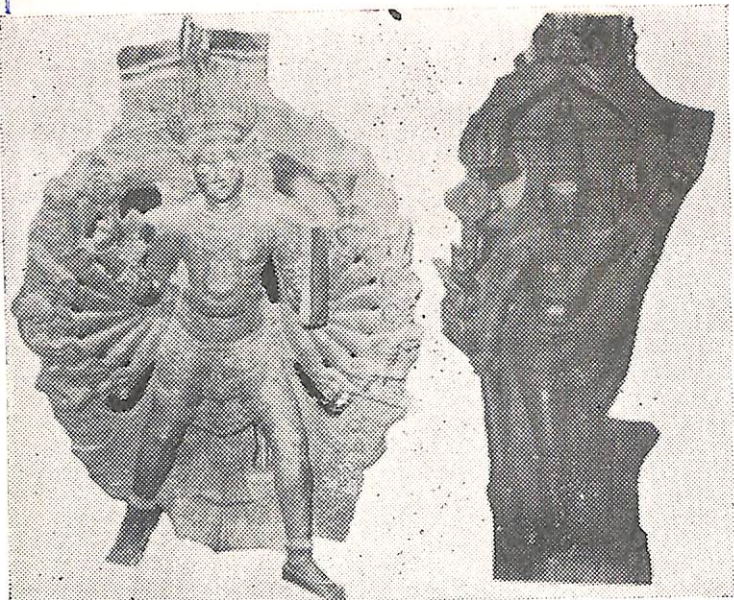
Lakshmana



Venugopala - Tiruvattar



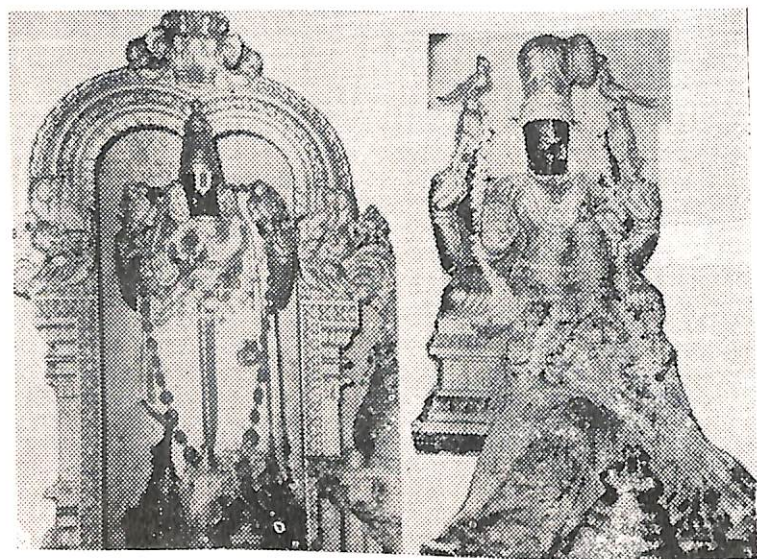
venugopala - Karamadai



Chaakrathalwar

Trivikrama

Thadicombu



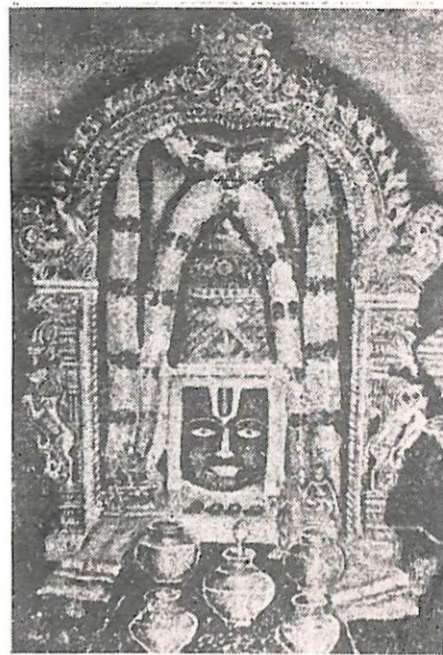
Adikesava Perumal

Mayuravalli Thayar

(Main Deities) Mylapore



Venkateswara - Tirumala



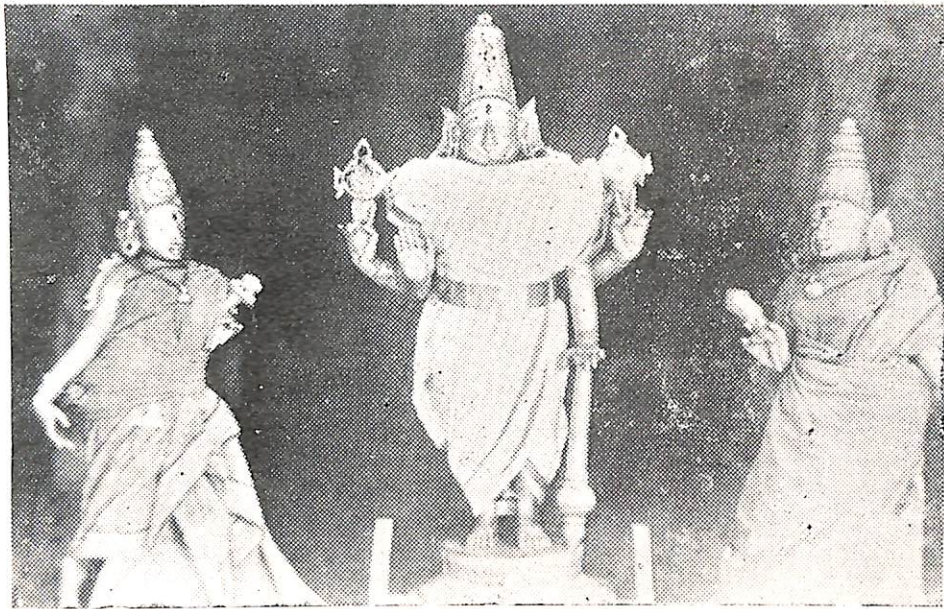
Ranganathar (Main Deity) - Karamadai



Sanganidhi

Lakshmi Narasimha
Thadiçombu

Padumanidhi



Soundaraja Perumal with his consorts - Thadicombu



Kali

Mahavishnu

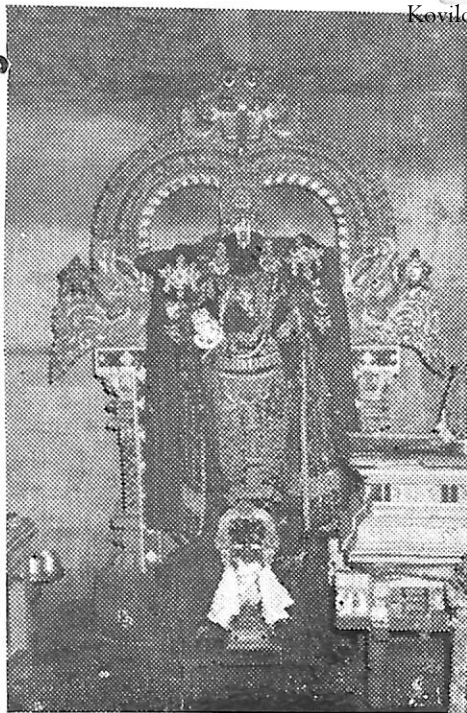
Thadicombu



Utsavars - Tiruvandhipuram



Sculptures - Krishnapuram



Adikesava Perumal (Main Deity)
Mylapore



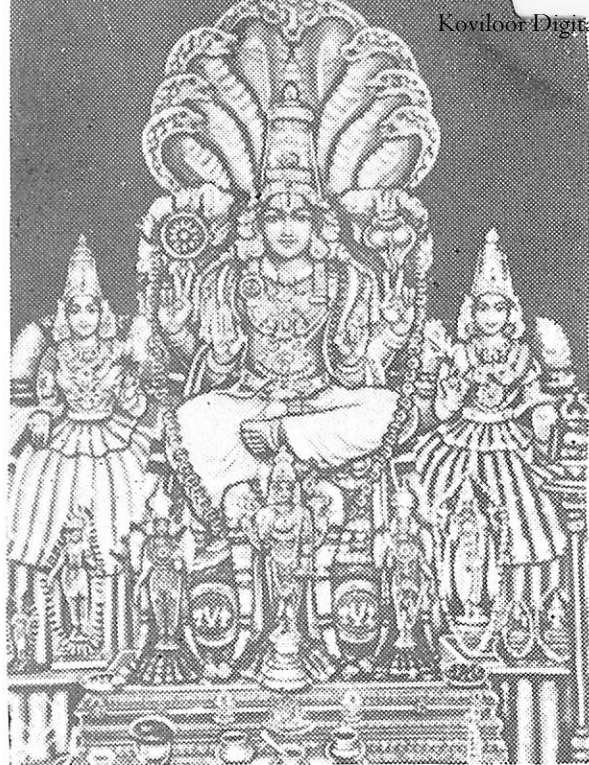
Vedanta Desikar
Tiruvandhipuram



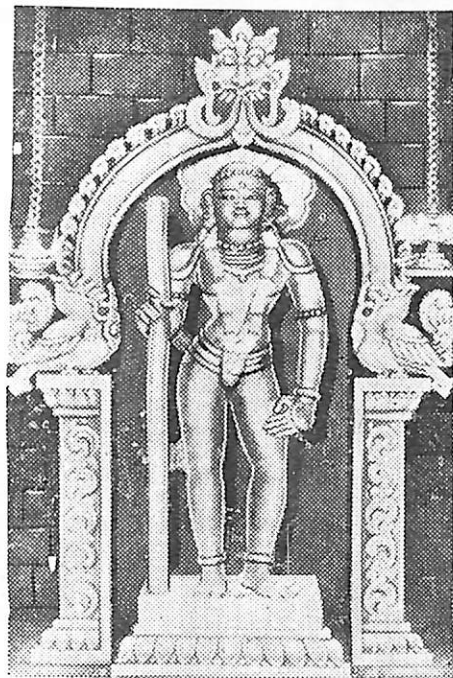
Betraya Swamy (Main Deity)
Denkanikota



Narasimha Killing Hiranya
Thadicombu



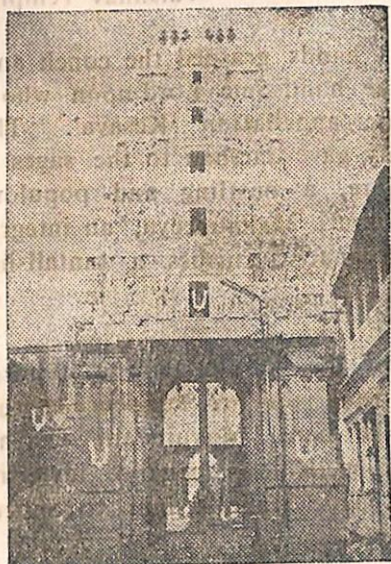
Koodal Alagar
(Main Deity) Madurai



Palani Andavar - Tiruthangal

Acc. No: 823

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MYLAPORE (MADRAS)

ADIKESAVA PERUMAL TEMPLE

Long ago Sage Bhrgu and a host of rishis were engrossed in a severe penance at a spot located near the Brindaranya kshetra. An execrable and depraved but robust demon named Madhu disgorged the sages from their hermitage. The demon was entranced by the picturesque spot. He directed the Asura-architect Mayan to create a splendid city which he named Mayurapuri. It became the metropolis of the Asura's domains. The sages who were the victims of the Asura's wrath sought asylum at the lotus feet of Kshirapathi Natha. Mahavishnu allayed their apprehensions and vanquished the demons. The sages conducted a 'Sayana Yaha' in honour of the victory. The Lord appeared before the sages thereby earning the epithet 'Sayana Kesava'. "His glowing and seemly countenance was ravished by ornate ornaments like keyura, Rathnakrita, Srivatsa, Kaustuba and Vanamalai; His hair was dakr

and curly. Two of His hands grasped the conch and the Disc". Such was the handsome Lord upon whom the sages conferred the appellation 'Kesava'. The place where the Almighty gave darshan to the sages is the present day Mylapore, a bustling and populous part of Madras. Mayurapuri Mahatmeeya, an integral part of the Garuda Purana, furnishes a tantalising account of this episode.

The fourth chapter of the Garuda Purana narrates how Goddess Lakshmi took up her residence at this hallowed place under the name Mayuravalli Thayar. Sage Bhrigu observed a meticulous penance invoking Mahavishnu. The Lord bade Mahalakshmi to appear as a child in the sage's hermitage.

Accordingly a suckling of bewitching charm was ushered into the world on the day of the Uthiram asterism in the month of Panguni. She chose a lovely lily flower floating in the tank located at Mayurapuri as her bed. Sage Bhrigu showered affection upon the divine child whom he named Bhargavi. Bhargavi blossomed like a waxing moon under the paternal care of the endeared sage into an adolescent maiden of unparalleled grace. When Lord Shiva plucked the fifth head of the contumacious Brahma the severed head got stuck in His hands. Lord Shiva was peregrinating the world with the skull in his hands. He was known as Kapali (the possessor of kapala or skull). When Bhargavi poured grain into the Brahma Kapala, it disappeared, thereby relieving Lord Shiva of His distress. He took up his abode at Mayurapuri under

the name Kapaleeswara. At this juncture Lord Vishnu appeared at the hermitage and married Bhargavi. He condescended to reside at the same spot as Adikesava Perumal while Mahalakshmi assumed the form of Mayuravalli Thayar.

Mahavishnu realised that engrossment in worldly desires and carnal pleasures on the part of the devotees was the root cause of their sufferings. Desirous of extricating them from the world of tormentation, he undertook various Avatars. These manifestations were intended to reform the people by steering them along the right path to eternal bliss. However the people failed to realise the intrinsic value of the messages and continued to lead a wayward life. Mahavishnu evolved a new idea to bring the people to their senses. Like the animal catcher who uses another animal to ensnare his prey, he enjoined His Divine weapons to take the form of human beings and to reform the multitudes by precept and practice, by freely mingling with them. In consonance with the Lord's injunctions the Divine weapons transfigured as human beings taught the essence of the vedas through the Divya Prabhanda, a collection of divine hymns. These outpourings were in Tamil, the language which even the masses could understand and appreciate. As they were deeply immersed in the thought of the Lord, they were known as Alwars. The twelve Alwars or the apostles of Mahavishnu like the Saivite Servitors (Nayanmars) spread the gospel of Mahavishnu to render the lives of the devotees sublime.

Peyyalwar, Boothathalwar and Poigai Alwar, popularly known as the Mudal Alwars (the early Alwars) form

a group by themselves. Peyyalwar was born on a lily flower crimson in colour and found in a well known as 'Manikairavani' located in a gracious flower - garden belonging to the Adikesava Perumal temple. It was a Thursday, a Dasami day (Sadayam asterism) of the month of Aippasi in the Siddharthi year belonging to the Dwapara Yuga (approximate year 866922). He was a manifestation of Nandaka, the puissant sword of Mahavishnu. He plunged himself headlong into devotion to the Lord, as a result of which he indulged in such acts like weeping, laughing, praying, dancing and singing His qualities. The people, unaccustomed to such supererogatory acts, began to doubt whether he was an incarnation of Devil. No doubt he was known as Peyyalwar (Pei-Devil). His extreme devotion earned for him the cognomen Mahadahvayar.

Garudapurana narrates the events revolving round the birth of Peyyalwar. Nandaka, the potent sword of Mahavishnu having assumed a human form served his liege steadfastly. The Lord had bestowed the name of Mahan upon the Ayudhapurusha. Mahan desired to inculcate the philosophy of life from the mouth of Mahalakshmi herself. The Goddess of wealth bade him to be reborn at Mayurapuri where she promised to fulfil his desire. Accordingly Mahan was reborn as Peyyalwar. He received thathva upadesa from Mayuravalli Thayar; He also propitiated Adikesava Perumal regularly adhering to the injunctions laid down in the Vaikanasa Agama. He engendered a Nandavana and offered flower garlands to the Lord methodically. At the same time Tirumazhisai Alwar, who hailed from Tirumazhisai, a suburb of Madras was engaged in a study of various

religions with the avowed object of seeking the real truth. He was peregrinating the world in search of true gnana but the actual truth eluded him. He came to Mayurapuri and offered his obeisance to Adikesava Perumal who directed him towards Mahadahvayar Tirumazhisaipiran met Peyyalwar who was proffering flowers to the Lord. Mahadahvayar was watering a thulsi plant which he had planted upside down. Tirumazhisai Alwar was bewildered by this strange behaviour. He queried "Noble sage! How can a Tulsi plant that is fixed upside down grow?". Pat came the reply, "If you can attain true gnana by studying other religions, I can also give life to a plant that is fixed upside down". After a brief hesitation Tirumazhisaipiran surrendered himself at the feet of Peyyalwar and sought gnanopadesa. Peyyalwar inculcated the knowledge of the Panchasamaskara mantras to his pupil. The following works furnish sufficient data regarding Peyyalwar and his contributions to Vaishnavism: Ramanujasambo composed by Ramanuja (XVI century A.D.), Palanadai Vilakkam written by Tirumazhisai Annava Bangar Swamigal, Divyachuricharita, (a Sanskrit work assignable to the XI Century A.D.) penned by Garudavahana Panditar, Guruparambaraiprabhava composed by Pin Pazhagiya Perumal Jeeyar, Tirunatchathiramalai indited by Periavachan Pillai, Prabhakti Sthothramala created by Pillai Logam Jeeyar, Alwar Charitha (a collection of palm leaf scripts), Periathirumudiadaivu, and Ramanujadivya-charita. All these works unanimously affirm the fact that Peyyalwar was born on a lily flower found in the Manikairavani Pushkarni which was associated with Adikesava Perumal Temple. At present it is identified with a well found in the Nandavana belonging

to Adikesava Perumal Temple. Its water is utilised for conducting the abhisheka of the Presiding Deity.

Adikesava Perumal Temple is situated at a distance of one furlong from the renowned Kapaleeswara Temple. The temple occupying an area of $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres houses two Main Sanctums and numerous shrines dedicated to the subsidiary Deities. The majestic seven-tiered Gopuram that garnishes the Main entrance however is devoid of any sculptures representing the Deities. The commencement of its construction started on 10th October 1955. It was consummated on 23rd May, 1958 at a cost of Rs. 1.26 lakhs. The spacious sanctum Sanctorum accommodates the Presiding Deity, Adikesava Perumal who gives darshan in a standing posture and faces east. Although a number of names are attributed to Mahavishnu the name of Kesava has received special consideration. The dyana sloka has elucidated the greatness of His name thus; "This name (Kesava) tastes sweeter than nectar: the greatness of the Maharoopi Srimad Narayana sounds too good for words; No other Sastra can surpass veda in wisdom and depth; Similarly no other name can match the name of Kesava". Nammalwar has stressed the eminence of the name Kesava thus; "Once the name of Kesava is uttered, all sins disappear as darkness before sunshine; hence the acolytes of Yama do not approach the persons who chant His name". Perialwar asserts that "the mother who names her son Kesava will never taste the horrors of hell". Thondaradipodi Alwar is confident that the utterance of the name of Kesava would be sufficient to transform hell into heaven. The name Adi denotes Adimoolam,

the progenitor of the world. Such is the greatness of the name Kesava,

On the rightside the divine consort Mayuravalli Thayar offers blessings to the devotees. "The tender creeper who resides at Mayurapuri is the resort of all kindness; The darling of Kesava does not even know how to inflict punishment upon any person. She is only capable of conferring boons upon the deserving devotees. Her very sight would efface all traces of sins and evils. While two of her arms grasp the lotus flowers, the other two arms offer the abhaya and the varada poses. The maiden with a blooming countenance sits in a padmasana pose. The possessor of such gracious features and laudsome qualities I propitiate". This is the genesis of the Sanskrit dyana slokas attributed to the Goddess.

A separate shrine houses the images of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita. A tradition exists that Rama while returning to Ayodhya after the conquest of Ravana sojourned at Mayurapuri. At the other end Andal has occupied yet another spacious shrine. Peyyalwar, the native of this kshetra has found a conspicuous place near the main shrine. "The enlightened one wears an albescent yajnopavita on his shoulder and the glowing tiruman mark on his forehead; his eyes are as charming as the lotus flower; his dark hairs are in curls; the arms are held in a supplicating posture. He is endowed with profound wisdom. To such a person who resembles a gem I offer my salutations". (Dyanasloka). The image of Anjaneya

has lured a large number of devotees recently. On the 2nd of October, 1955, the image of Tirumazhisai Alwar was installed within the precincts of the temple.

Ramanuja Divya Charita composed by Pillai Logam Jeeyar throws light on the links that Ramanuja had with this kshetra. Asurikesava Perumal who hailed from Sriperumbudur visited the hallowed shrine of Adikesava Perumal and conducted a glorious yajna invoking the Lord to favour him with a son. His desire was fulfilled. This son was no other person than the illustrious Ramanuja who was destined to keep the torch of Vaishnava faith burning. This work states that Ramanuja after lauding Lord Parthasarathy of Triplicane in devotional hymns visited Adikesava Perumal Temple and dedicated hymns to the Lord. Ramanujasambo, a work in chaste Sanskrit ascribed to Ramanuja contains a sloka which honours Peyyalwar thus: - "I salute the great one who was born on a lily flower found in a well at Mayurapuri and who propitiated the Lord who resides in the august company of His Devis by delivering the Tamil Vedic Hymns known as the Third Thiruvandhadhi".

The popular decad beginning with the words "Keesu Keesu" composed by Andal makes a passing reference to Kesava. Vanamamalai Jeeyar opines that this decad lauds Adikesava, the Presiding Deity of Mylapore (Swathi Sartham).

Adikesava Perumal offered His benefactions to a ruler named Sumangan who was a scion of the Surya

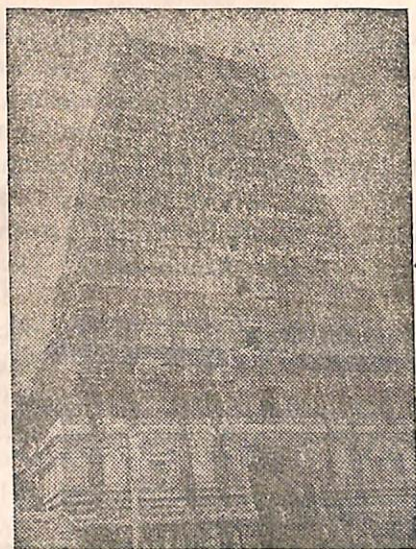
race and presented him with a Garuda flag. Both Surya and Rudra offered obeisance to Adikesava Perumal at this sanctimonious spot.

Poojas are conducted six times a day adhering to the principles of the Vaikanasa Agama. A ten day festival is organised in honour of Adikesava Perumal in the month of Panguni. It concludes with the Theerthavari function which normally falls on the Tiruvonam day. Peyyalwar is honoured with a majestic festival, spanning a period of ten days. On the concluding day of this festival which falls on the Sadayam asterism the three Mudal Alwars are crowded in a small cellar where Adikesava Perumal blesses them, reminiscent of the original incident which took place at Tirukoilur. Mayuravalli Thayar is honoured during the Navarathri festival, Panguni Uthiram and on certain Fridays The temple adheres to the Tenkalai Sampradayam. It possesses two palanquins besides eleven wooden vahanas. At the onset the temple was managed by Nattu Narayanaswamy Mudaliar. Later a committee of -5- members took over the reins of administration. Parts of the temple were renovated and a consecration ceremony held in 1989 marked the culmination of the efforts.

The huge tank located a little away from the temple, known as Chithrai Kulam is not in a usable condition Chandra, a victim of his mentor's curse propitiated Adikesava Perumal. Following the Lord's injunctions he engendered a theertha where all the sacred rivers had a confluence. Hence it was named arva Theertha. Chandra had a dip in the theertha

and received redemption from the curse. As a corollary to this incident, the tank was also named Chandra Pushkarani. Efforts to renovate the theertha and to render it usable were made in early 1990.

In the eighteenth century the adherents of the Vadakalai Sampradayam sought the permission of the temple authorities to construct a small shrine to house the image of their preceptor Vedanta Desikar. In course of time small shrines were constructed to accommodate Srinivasa perumal, the Alvars, Alamelu Mangai, Lakshmi Narasimha, Andal, Sudarshan and Ramanujar. Now the temple of Vedanta Desikar draws huge attendance on festive occasions. Here poojas and festivals are conducted on a grand scale



TIRUKOILUR

TRIVIKRAMAR TEMPLE

The lamp of Divinity lit by the sagacious sages of the vedic times was extinguished by a tempest of alien contacts in the early centuries of the Christian era. Puffed up with vanity, the people began to scorn at the soul-elevating doctrines promulgated by the ascetics, which formed the bed-rock of spiritualism. They began to squander away their precious time in endless logomachies and sectarian wrangles. The advent of the Alvars (the twelve apostles of Mahavishnu) and the Nayanmars (the sixty three servitors of Shiva) removed the thick gloom of Nihilism and rekindled the flame of divinity.

Among the Alvars, Poigai Alwar, Boothathalwar and Peialwar constituted the earlier Trinity. Poigai Alwar, the incarnation of Panchajanya (Mahavishnu's conch) was born at Kanchipuram. Peialwar, the incarnation of Nandaka (the sword of Mahavishnu) had Mylapore as his birthplace. Boothathalwar was ushered into this world at Mamallapuram as the incarnation of Mahavishnu's mace (Kaumedaki). They lead an unostentatious life visiting the hallowed Vaishnav Kshetras. Once they went to a holy place called Tirukoilur, each travelling by a different route; of course they had not met each other. Mahavishnu desired that they should have acquaintance with each other.

At His behest, torrential rain lashed the sacred place. Poigai Alwar found asylum in the hermitage of a destitute devotee. He was accommodated in a narrow pial where there was just enough space for one person to lie down. In a short while Boothathalwar knocked at the door of the hut seeking shelter. He was directed towards the same pial with the words "There is just enough space for two persons to sit". Soon Peialwar too arrived at the hut with a similar request. He was housed in the same pial with the words; "Three persons can stand here". The confluence of the three devotees had been accomplished. As they stood cogitating on the greatness of Srimad Narayana they felt the exertion of great pressure as though a fourth person had entered the room. They realised the presence of the Omnipotent Mahavishnu in their midst. A current of divine energism pervaded the

atmosphere. The pitch darkness gave way to a resplendent glow of enlightenment. The three savants gave vent to their enthralling experiences in three hundred sublime verses.

Poigai Alwar lit a lamp of wisdom using the earth as the bowl, the rolling ocean as oil and the Sun as the effulgent flame. He urged the luminant Chakrapani to relieve the world of pain and suffering. At the same time Boothathalwar lit an identical lamp but by using different components. "With flowing love as the bowl, aspiration as oil, blissful thought as the wick, I light a lamp of wisdom to adore Narayana." The two lamps of different dimensions lit by the two servitors emanated dazzling light which enabled Peialwar to have a luculent vision of the Almighty in his heart. He gave a picturesque description of the indelible vision thus: "I saw the radiance of Mahalakshmi, the divine consort; I saw his golden form, effulgent as the burning Sun, which shelters the divine consort; I beheld a sharp discus which strikes terror in the hearts of the antagonists; I had a glimpse of the charming conch; A sight of the sea-coloured Lord engenders such thoughts in me". The devotional outpourings of the three Alwars have been classified as the first three 'Thiruvanthathis'. Divya-prabhanda embalming - 4000 - tantalising verses proclaiming the aspirations and the experiences of the dedicated minds deeply immersed in Narayana consciousness had its origin at Tirukoilur. Thus Tirukoilur occupies a distinct place in the history of Vaishnavism. It is located at a distance of 40 Kilometres from Villupuram and 35 Kilometres from Tiruvannamalai.

Tirukoilur is rich in tradition both historical and ecclesiastical. It is one among the Pancha Krishnaranya Kshetras; the other Kshetras being Tirukannapuram, Tirukannankudi, Tirukannamangai and Kapisthalam. The kshetra kanda contained in Padma Purana extols the glory of Tirukoilur. It has its association with the Trivikrama Avatar of Mahavishnu. Mahabali, the ruler of the Asura race (the grandson of the devout Prahlada), discomfited in battle by Indra, desired to avenge the defeat. His pent-up feelings were fanned by a coterie of sages which included the venerable Sukra (the preceptor of the demons). A reputed yajna known as Viswajit was performed under the aegis of the rishis. Out of the sacrificial fire emerged a glowing chariot inlaid with gold and yoked to divine horses which put to shame Indra's steeds in radiance. An armour of excellent workmanship a quiver of inexhaustible arrows and an unfading garland were presented to him. Armed with such potent weapons and fortified by the divine powers of the sages, Mahabali hurled his dauntless asuras and caused a tremor in the hearts of the Devas. The forces of the devas ran pellmell like pestilence stricken multitudes. Ultimately they abandoned their world and fell prostrate at the feet of Mahavishnu. Mahavishnu promised to reprimand the Asura ruler and manifested himself as a child of Aditi, the mother of the celestials. Mahabali had envisaged a plan to perform a mammoth Asvamedha sacrifice under the guidance of his mentor Sukra. Mahavishnu entered the sacrificial hall incognito as a shortstatured Brahmachari '(Vamana') before whose lustre the rishis seemed to pale into a shadow. He held an Umbrella, a water-pot and a staff in his hands. He wore a girdle of munja grass; an upper garment of black antelope's skin

encircled in the form of yajnopavitha covered his body; the matted locks of hair on his forehead presented a charming sight. Although Mahabali belonged to the Asura race he was well-versed in the principles of Dharma. He accorded a warm reception to the guest and paid him due respects. He also promised to grant any boon that Vamana would ask. Vamana just wanted a strip of land measured by three paces of his feet, a mere pittance by Mahabali's standards. Sukra, the preceptor of the Asuras scented some foul play and warned his protegee about the sinister designs of Mahavishnu. The grandson of Prahlada would not repudiate his word even in the face of dire consequences.

The puny figure of the Brahmachari expanded in an amazing manner. In the All Comprehending Cosmic Form Mahabali witnessed every object, static and dynamic in the Universe. The tiny Vamana transfigured as the mighty Trivikrama measured the whole of the earth in one gigantic stride; the Heaven was hardly adequate for his second stride; Having thus dispossessed Mahabali of his kingdom, Mahavishnu asked him place for his third stride. Although duped and dispossessed, Mahabali remained unruffled and resolute. He implored the Lord to place his third step upon his forehead. The Lord accepted the supplication. An underworld known as Satala was created by V swakarma at the instance of Mahavishnu. Mahabali was directed to man that kingdom with Daityas and Danavas and to rule over it. Satala would be the envy of heaven in splendour. This is the story of the Vamana and the Trivikrama Avatars of Mahavishnu.

When this phenomenon took place, Sage Mrikandu was engrossed in an austere penance. His heart anguished that he had missed a great sight. He yearned to have a darshan of Trivikrama. Brahma counselled him to perform a sacrifice at Krishnapuri adjoining the Krishnavana and to feed the indigent people sumptuously. One day a decrepit old man entered his hut seeking food. Unfortunately not even a morsel of food was available in the hut. Mrikandu's wife prayed fervently to Mahalakshmi and secured some food which she offered to the guest. Mahavishnu abjured the frame of the old man and presented himself in the magnificent form of Trivikrama. Within the colossal frame was revealed all that exist in the world. One of his arms held the Sudarsana (discus of irresistible might) ; the mighty bow which could produce a twangling sound reminiscent of the thunderclap adorned another arm; the Panchajanya (conch) whose blare resembled the roll of thunder was held in yet another hand. The sword Vidhyadara with its moon-marred scabbard, the mighty Kaumedaki (mace) and the quiver that never got empty of arrows were also held in the other hands. He stood sparkling in the brilliance of his diadem, armlets, fish-marked ear rings, superb girdle, Kaustuba jewel and yellow garments. A resplendent Srivatsa mark was discernible on his person; a fragrant wreath of the choicest flowers that attracted hundreds of bees rolled over his neck. His dark blue complexion resembled rain-bearing clouds. ridevi and Bhudevi attended on him reverentially. Prahlada, Mahabali, Sukra, Devas and Sages stood around the Lord offering their supplications. A sense of ecstasy

overcame Mrikandu at the sight of Trivikrama. Mahavishnu condescended to reside eternally at that place in the same posture. Mrikandu was singularly fortunate to find a permanent place near the Lord. Kalava, a sage of renown was performing a penance in the august company of a number of sapient rishis. They were harassed by an iniquitous demon called Pathalaketu. The demon was the recipient of a considerable amount of favours from Brahma. Unable to chasten the demon, the rishi surrendered at the lotus feet of Mahavishnu. At the Lord's injunction a doughty warrior called Kusathwaja endeavoured to extirpate the Asura's forces. Pathalaketu in the form of a fiery boar charged upon Kusathwaja who ultimately put the Asura to the sword. Having accomplished the divine command he went to the hermitage of Kalava. The rishi informed the ruler of the sanctity and the eminence of Krishnaranya Kshetra. Kusathwaja abdicated his throne, performed an austere penance and attained liberation from the world.

A number of sacred theerthas are associated with Tirukoilur. Ablution of Trivikrama's feet was performed by Brahma with the sacred waters of the Ganges; the water that trickled out of his feet took the form of a tank called Chakra Theertha. Indra had a dip in this theertha and regained his lost possessions. The same water, was the source of the river Pennar which flows nearby. Guha took bath in the Chank Theertha located on the east and propitiated Lord Vasudeva who blessed him with his darshan. Ganga Theertha, Akasa Ganga, Varaha Theertha and Kalava Theertha are also believed to exist in this hallowed spot.

The Trivikrama temple occupying an area of 5 acres has two huge towers on the east and the west. A majestic tower of eleven tiers located a few yards away from the main entrance at the end of Sannadhi street compares favourably with some of the tallest temple towers found in India. Passing the Garuda Sthamba and the main eastern tower which is believed to have been fabricated at the instance of Tirumangai Alwar one can enter the Main shrine. The enormous image of Trivikrama with one leg raised to measure the Heaven and the second one placed upon Mahabali's head makes the devotee bow with his diadems trembling. The image of the Presiding Deity is made of wood and faces east. At his foot, Brahma and Namuchi, the son of Mahabali offer their obeisance. Mahabali, Sukra, Sage Mrikandu and his wife Sridevi and the three Alvars - Poigai Alwar, Boothathalwar and Pei Alwar occupy their respective positions nearby. Trivikrama's right hand clutches the conch. The finial crowning the Garbagriha goes by the name of 'Srihara Vimana'.

Durga is normally accommodated in Siva Temples. However, a shrine of Durga is housed in the Trivikrama temple which is a rare feature. It is believed that she was performing a tapas at the foot of the Vindhyas; In compliance with Trivikrama's request she took up the position of the Guardian-Deity of this temple. Devotees offer worship to Durgal with zeal and zest.

The divine consort known as Pushpavalli Thayar or Poongoval Nachiar blesses the devotees in a sanctum of substantial size. A number of mantaps and subsidiary shrines are found in the interior of the temple. Deities like Lakshmi Narayana, Lakshmi Narasimha, Andal, Rama, Varadaraja perumal, Viswaksena, Ramanuja and Manavala Munigal occupy separate shrines in the interior of the temple.

References to Tirukoilur are found in the literary masterpieces of the Sangam Age (first three centuries of the Christian era) like Ahananuru, Purananuru, Natrinai, Kurunthogai, etc. Poets have lavished encomiums upon Malayaman Tirumudikari, the ruler of Tirukoilur who was endowed with supreme prowess and a charitable disposition. He was rated one among the seven great patrons of the Sangam Age.

The illustrious poetess Avvaiyar arranged for the marriage of the two daughters of a chieftain who had patronised her at Tirukoilur. The marriage was attended even by the three great monarchs of the Chera, Chola and Pandya dynasties. After finding suitable husbands for Angavai and Sangavai, the daughters of Pari, the eminent poet Kapilar consigned himself to fire at this place. This event is commemorated by a huge rock known as 'Kapilar Kal' (the stone of Kapilar) at the top of which a small shrine exists. A festival is held annually in honour of Kapilar at this place.

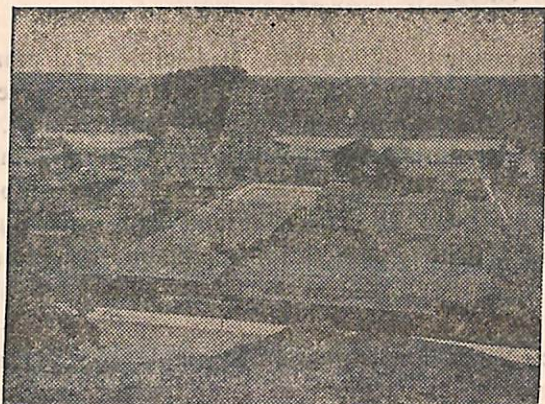
The temple was a pilgrim centre of renown in the days of the Alvars. In addition to the first three Alvars,

Tirumangai Alwar too has dedicated hymns to the Lord of Tirukoilur. Arjuna, the Pandava prince is believed to have sojourned at Tirukoilur during his pilgrimage of the South. The main shrines were constructed of bricks in the early times. In the days of Vira Rajendra Chola (1057—58), Narasimha Varma, a feudatory of Maladunadu reconstructed the central shrines with granite. Munificent grants of land, gold and paddy executed by Chola rulers like Kulothunga, Udayar Rajendra, Rajendra II and Chola Keraladeva, Vikramapandya, Koperunjinga and Vijayanagara rulers Saluva Narasimha and Sadasiva Raya are gleaned from a host of inscriptions found in the temple. Chola inscriptions state that Tirukoilur was located in Madurantaka Chaturvedimangala, a sub-division of Kurukkai Kootram found in Maladunadu. The temple was expanded with elaborate mantaps in the days of Vijayanagar and the Nayak rulers. The temple served as a fortress for the British during the Carnatic wars. It was even attacked during the days of Hyder Ali.

Poojas are performed adhering meticulously to the Agamic principles. A ten day Brahmotsava is Panguni (March-April), Adyayana Utsava of Thayar held in Markazhi (November-December) and Manavala Munigal festival held in Aippasi (October-November) last for ten days. Monthly festivals like Sri Ramanavami, Garudaseva, Adipuram, Sri Krishna Jayanthi, Navarathri, Karthigai and Masi Magam are also celebrated on a limited scale. The festival idols found here are of artistic merit. A number of wooden vahanas are also in use.

A descendant of Anayar, a disciple of Ramanujar now acts as the Jeeyar of the mutt. He is the hereditary Trustee of the temple. The present Jeeyar - Shri. U. V. Srinivasa Ramanujachariar heads a Renovation Committee which had taken up the herculean task on renovating the Vimanas, Gopurams, Mantaps and other parts of the temple. The Consecration Ceremony was conducted recently.

The Veerattaneswaraswamy temple of Kilur and Oppilamaneeswara temple of Arankandanallur are also found within the municipal limits of Tirukoilur. Both these temples also could boast of hoary antiquity.



TIRUVANDHIPURAM

DEVANATHASWAMY TEMPLE

The area encompassing certain parts of the present-day South Arcot, North Arcot and Sambuvarayar Districts was known as Nadunad in ancient times. This division could boast of 21 hallowed Saivite shrines eulogised in the Thevaram hymns. Within this part are also located two Vaishnavite kshetras which have drawn the attention of Alwars. They are Thirukoilur and Thiruvandhipuram. Thiruvandhipuram is situated on the banks of river Kedilam at a distance of 5 kilometres from Cuddalore, the head quarters of the South Arcot District.

Scintillating accounts of the kshetra occur in Brahmanda Purana (5 chapters), Brahma Naradeeya Purana (5 chapters) and Kantha Purana (4 chapters). A group of erudite and sapient sages betook themselves to

Tirupatkadal to have a darshan of Mahavishnu Narayana could not be found there. They immediately repaired to Sri Vaikuntam. Disappointment awaited them here too. The dwarapalakas directed them towards a serene spot in South India located at a distance of half-a yojana from the coast. It was bound on the North by Kancheepuram, South by Kumbakonam & North-West by Thiruvencatam. At this tranquil spot Bhudevi and sage Markandeya were engrossed in penance invoking Mahavishnu. The rishis also reached this place and had a hearty darshan of Mahavishnu in His resplendent form. The irresistible weapons - Sudarshana, Panchajanya and Komedaki graced his arms. His comeliness was further augmented by glittering ornaments like kaustubam, vanamalai and crown. His nails glowed like the full moon; his eyes twinkled like gems; His teeth sparkled like the choicest pearls; His muscular arms resembled the trunk of an elephant; Broad chests and lion like hips enhanced his masculine charm. This was the glorious form of the Lord that made the devotees delirious with delight. The atmosphere reverberated with music as musical instruments resounded to the accompaniment of devotional hymns. Adishesha, Garuda, Bhudevi, Markandeya and Sanatkumara received his benefactions; Brahmadeva who was stationed on the banks of the Brahma theertha propitiated him. Lord Shiva after consigning the Tripuras to ashes sojourned at Thirupathiripuliyur to offer his salutation to Mahavishnu.

Mahalakshmi was gratified by the penance performed by Markandeya. In accordance with his wishes she appeared as a handsome child seated on a fragrant lotus. The sage gleefully took possession of the child.

He named her Tarangamukha Nandini as she was found on a lotus which was tossed about by the gentle waves of the river. Under his paternal care she blossomed forth into a paragon of beauty who was well accomplished in all arts. At the appropriate juncture Mahavishnu appeared in his infinite form and married her.

A sage named Thaboragi was involved in an incessant penance seeking the blessings of Mahavishnu. Sage Bhrigu was informed about the sanctiness of this hallowed place by Thaboragi. Bhrigu also performed a penance in all earnestness. Mahalakshmi once again took the form of a child. Bhrigu named her Bhargavi and taught her the sacred texts. As the marriageable age approached she worshipped Mahavishnu in all sincerity, seeking his hand in marriage. Yet again Mahavishnu descended to the earth, married her and offered her a place in his person. Bhrigu was granted an honourable place by his side so that he could eternally have a darshan of his foster daughter. Even Devendra sought the blessings of Mahavishnu to absolve him of the sin of Brahmahathi. Indra was afflicted by this sin when he treacherously slew Vriddhrasura.

Theerthas believed to possess extraordinary powers exist at this place. The Garuda theertha engendered by Garudalwar himself is sanctimonious. A sagacious sage was engaged in incessant worship at patalalokha in a garden of enchanting beauty belonging to a ruler named Sugriva. The sage had created a lake known as Vraja Theertha. A dip in it was tantamount to having a sacred bath in all the sacred waterways of heaven.

Mahavishnu who had cognizance of its sanctity commissioned Garudalwar to secure water from it for the ablution ceremonies. Garudalwar managed to fill his kamandalam with the sacred water surreptitiously when the sage was preoccupied with his poojas. However the sage detected Garuda's designs in the nick of time and cursed that the water would turn dirty. Garuda had to pacify the sage by stating Mahavishnu's orders. The mollified sage restored the water to its pristine purity by withdrawing his curse. These occurrences had delayed Garuda's mission.

The auspicious moment was fast approaching. There was no indication of Garuda's return from the Underworld. Mahavishnu ultimately enjoined Adisesha to create a holy theertha. Adisesha obliged his liege by striking the earth with his tail. Mahavishnu was able to complete the rites in time. Garuda who arrived at the place belatedly was disillusioned as his mission did not fructify. Mahavishnu consoled Garuda with the assurance that He would have a ceremonial bath at the Garuda theertha during the rathotsavam. This is the origin of the Kedilam river that fertilises a substantial part of South Arcot District.

The Sesha theertha has now taken the form of a well whose wall is embellished by the image of a serpent. Devotees pour offerings like milk, pepper, jaggery, camphor, etc., into this well, thereby rendering its water unnatural in odour, colour and taste. Still it is used for cooking prasadams in the temple Madapalli. It is stated that the eatables cooked in the temple kitchen

are long lasting. A theertha named after Chandra is also found in this kshetra.

Thiruvandhipuram is the only Vaishnavite sthala located on the banks of river Kedilam. On its Northern bank exist Saivite kshetras like Tiruppadiripuliyur, Tirunavalur and Tiruamur. Similarly hallowed centres like Tirumanikuli and Sendamangalam are situated on its Southern banks. Normally Kedilam runs from west to east. However it moves from South to North near the Temple thereby earning the epithet Uttaravahini. The river provides a picturesque surrounding to the temple.

The main entrance situated on the east is not garnished by any tower although an unassuming five-tiered gopuram is perched over the western entrance which faces the river. The Presiding Deity whose nomenclature is Deivanayagan has positioned himself in a standing posture and faces the east. The utsavar is known by various names as Moovaraghia oruvan, Achuta, Dvishatnatha, Devanatha, Vibhuthanatha and Dasasathya. In a spacious sanctum the divine consort referred to by various names as Senkamalavalli Thayar, Hemambujavalli Thayar, Vaikuntanayagi and Amrutavasini blesses the devotees in a sitting pose. The sanctum sanctorum is crowned by a vimana known as Chandra vimana or suttasatva vimana.

A belief exists from time immemorial that Devanatha, the Presiding Deity is the elder brother of Lord Venkatachalapathi of Tirupathi. Accordingly zealots who are unable to visit Tirupathi could place their

offerings and fulfil their vows, intended for Tirupathi at Tiruvandhipuram. However the devotees do not submit the offerings intended for the Lord of Tiruvandhipuram at Tirupathi.

The interior parts of the temple accommodates Deities like Pallikonda Perumal, Andal, the Alwars, Ramanuja, Narasimha, Adi Kesava Perumal and Garudalwar. It is customary for Garudalwar to hold his hands in anjalihasta pose. Unusually he presents himself in a standing pose with his hands spread at this temple. The images of Rama Lakshmana and Sita are bewitching and could favourably be compared to similar specimens found at Vaduvur and Thillaivilagam. Normally Rama grasps the Kothanda in his left hand. The idol found at Tiruvandhipuram however grips the bow in his right hand. Similarly Anjaneya cups his mouth with his hands. It is to be borne in mind that normally Anjaneya is portrayed in an anjali-hasta posture.

Among the Alwars, Tirumangai Alwar has given an amazing account of Tiruvandhipuram in ten hymns (1148-57) In consonance with the usual practice, he has ascribed the various avataric deeds of Mahavishnu to the Lord of Tiruvandhipuram. From the hymns we learn that the temple was situated at the foot of a hillock even in the days of the Alwars. The poet has admired the scenic beauty and the bountiness of the region. Sri Villiputhur Alwar's Bharatam gives an absorbing narration of Arjuna's visit to Tiruvandhipuram during his theertha yatra, when he proffered worship to

the Lord. Divya Kavi Pillai Perumal Aiyangar states that the inhabitants of heaven pay their respects to the devotees of Lord Devanatha by showering fragrant flowers. (Ashta Prabhanda)

The kshetra was named Tiruvahindrapuram in honour of Adishesha (Ahindra) who propitiated Devanatha. A fascinating anecdote regarding the origin of this temple is in vogue. It was a Saivite temple at the onset and was later converted into a Vaishnavite temple. A Chola ruler was a Saivite fanatic to the core. He would demolish any Vaishnavite shrine that met his eye. He came to Tiruvandhipuram and marched towards the temple. The presence of the images of Vinayaka and Dakshinamurthy who are normally associated with Saivite temples perplexed him. As he neared the sanctum Lord Devanatha presented Himself in a unique form combining the features of the Trimurthis. Even today the utsavar bears the lotus flower of Brahma, conch and disc, the favourite weapons of Mahavishnu and the third eye which Siva possesses. Thus he testifies to the oneness of the three deities. The Suttasatva vimana that adorns the sanctum is embellished by the images of Mahavishnu on the east, Dakshinamurthy on the west and Brahma on the North.

Poojas are conducted four times a day in conformity with the agamic injunctions. The temple owns 230 acres of wet and dry lands, a few houses and opulent jewels. It also possesses a Golden coated Palanquin and silver coated simha and hamsa vahanas besides a variety of wooden vahanas. The Brahmotsavam

conducted for 10 days in the Tamil Month of Chithirai (April-May) is a grand affair. The rathotsavam held on the ninth day lures a large number of devotees, many of whom congregate even on the previous evening. Other festivals like Karthigai Thallattu utsavam, Margazhi day and night utsavams (21 days) and Masi Magam deserve special mention. During the Masi Magam festival the deity is taken in a ceremonial procession to the Cuddalore coast where he has a dip in the sea. Later he sojourns at a Mantap to bless the devotees before his return. Thiruvandhipuram is a renowned pilgrim centre. Pilgrims flock to this temple on auspicious occasions to tonsure their heads, and to propitiate the Lord. Marriages are also performed in large numbers.

The government epigraphist has deciphered and registered more than fifty inscriptions (85-109, 136-37, 243-57) belonging to the Chola and the Pandya rule. Inscriptions incised in the days of the Chola rulers Kulothunga, Vikrama and Rajaraja III, the Pandya sovereigns Sundarapandya I, Vikrama, Virapandya III and Jatavarman Sundarapandya, the Vijayanagara King Achyuta Raya and the Pallava scion Koperunjinga mostly reveal gifts for burning perpetual lamps at the temple. Valuable historical information is furnished by an inscription belonging to the reign of Rajaraja III. The Chola country was torn by internecine civil war. Koperunjinga, a scion of the Pallava dynasty outmanoeuvred the Cholas at Tellar and imprisoned Rajaraja III at his capital Sendamangalam. Vira Narasimha II, the Hoysala ruler came to his rescue, overwhelmed Koperunjinga's forces and reestablished Rajaraja III on the Chola throne. In this battle Parakramabahu, the

ruler of Ceylon breathed his last. Another inscription incised on the left side of the western tower is in the form of a poem. It lavishes encomiums upon the Maravars who manned the army of a feudatory named Tondiarkoman Adayav Alainthan. In the reign of Tribhuvanachakravarthi Kulothunga Chola land was gifted to the temple in accordance with the wishes of prince Vishnuvardhana. Maravarman Tribhuvanachakravarthi Sundarapandya ordained that the procedures of worship followed in all the other temples are also applicable to the temple of Tiruvandhipuram. A tower was constructed at the temple at the instance of Koperunjinga. The descendants of Ramanuja were accorded certain rights regarding the receipt of theertha and prasada at the temple in the days of Achyuta Raya of Vijayanagar.

Tiruvandhipuram was a favourite kshetra of Vedanta Desikar, the renowned acharya of the Vadakalai sect of Vaishnavism. A dedicated couple - Anantachuri Somayaji and Thotharammai lived at a locality known as Thooppil in Kanchipuram. On the day of Tiruvonam asterism in the Tamil month of Purattasi in 1268 a son was ushered into the world and was named Venkatesan. He was a prodigy who mastered vedas, sastras, Gita Bhashyam, and Bhagavat vishayam at a tender age. Ramanuja, the worthy exponent of the Vishishtadwaita Philosophy, realised that Venkatesan could be groomed as his heir apparent. He taught him the Garuda mantra and provided the necessary guidance. Ultimately he conferred the name of Vedanta Desikar, upon him. It is firmly believed that both Garudalwar and Hayagriva appeared before Vedanta Desikar and blessed him, besides teaching

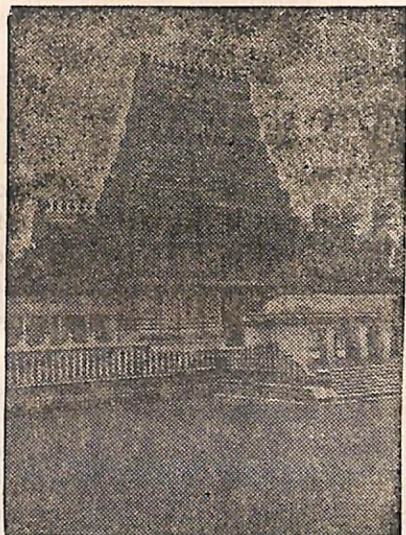
various mantras. His entire life was dedicated to Hindu religion. He lived upto a ripe age of 102, studying and writing books, visiting kshetras and theerthas, participating in consecration ceremonies and preaching the tenets of religion to the rank and file.

Vedanta Desikar had considerable affinity for Tiruvandhipuram. He even exclaimed that he could spend his time rhapsodically to his heart's desire at this place. Two Sanskrit works - Devanayake panchasat and Achuta sataka and seven Tamil prabhandas - Mummanikovai, Ammanai, Oosal, Aesal, Navamanimalai, Kazhal and Pandhu have emanated from his pen. They bear the stamp of his wisdom and erudition. It is no surprise that the shrine of Vedanta Desikar housed in the temple is held in great reverence by the devotees. It has been honoured by the installation of a dwajasthamba in front.

The image of Vedanta Desikar housed in this shrine is believed to be his own creation. A curious episode exists regarding the origin of this image. A head strong sculptor, puffed up with vanity, challenged Vedanta Desikar to evolve his own image. By the grace of Hayagriva, Vedanta Desikar cast an enchanting figure of his own self. Upon seeing it the sculptor hung his head in shame. No doubt Vedanta Desikar is propitiated on an equal footing with the presiding deity. Another mantap has been constructed in honour of Desikar at Tiruvandhipuram. Garudalwar had offered upadesam to Vedanta Desikar. This incident is recapitulated during the annual Tiruvonam Festival. A small hillock referred to as "Oushada giri" exists near the temple. A

fragment of the Sanjeevi Hill carried by Anjaneya to cure Lakshmana, is said to have formed into this hill. A small shrine located at its top accommodates Lord Hayagriva, Lakshmi, Venugopala, Adishesha and Garud-alwar. Garuda is represented as though he is offering upadesa.

This temple dedicated to Hayagriva is the only one of its kind found in South India. Two iniquitous demons - Madhu and Kaitaba transfigured as two horses relieved Brahma of his valued possession - the four Vedas. Mahavishnu embarked upon the mission of resuscitating the vedas. This was the Hayagriva Avatar known otherwise as Hayavadana. It combined the face of the horse with the body of a human being. Hayagriva is propitiated as the conferrer of Gnana who repulses ignorance. Being an ardent devotee of Hayagriva, Vedanta Desikar has lavished encomiums upon Him in his works.



TIRUKANNA PURAM

SOWRIRAJA PERUMAL TEMPLE

“I will go to Kannapuram; I will forget my worries”; so goes a popular Tamil devotional song rendered by Dr. Sirkazhi Govindarajan. The place in question is Thirukannapuram, a tiny agrarian village situated by the side of the Mudikondan river, a tributary of Kaveri, in the Thanjavur District. It can be reached by buses from towns of renown like Nagapattinam, Tiruvarur, Kumbakonam and Mayiladuthurai. It houses the famous Vaishnavite temple dedicated to Sowriraja Perumal. It occupies a prominent place among the 108 Divya Desas (holy places) of the Vaishnavites.

According to the Sthala Purana, the place is so called because Lord Krishna (Kanna) chose it as his abode and yearned to live here. It ranks the first place among the Pancha (Five) Krishnaranya Kshetras. It is the eastern gate of Sri Ranganathar of Srirangam.

Tirupathi, Srirangam, Sri Mushnam, Nanguneri, Salagramam, Pushkar and Padarikashram are the eight holy centres which grant salvation to the ardent devotees who worship there. They stand for the divine Ashtatshara (eight - lettered) mantram of "HARI OM NARAYANA", each centre standing for one of the letters. However, a sincere devotee who worships at Thirukannapuram is blessed to derive all the benefits of having chanted the eight - lettered mantra. It is here that the Lord manifests himself as the "ASHTATSHARA MANTRA SWAROOPAM", a combination of spiritual significance of the various forms of the Lord in other sacred centres. It is also regarded as Bhoolokha Vaikuntam (Vaikuntam on earth) and hence the Swarga Vasal (entrance) is conspicuous by its absence.

As one enters the village, the natural surroundings seem to cast a spell upon him. The temple is located in the heart of the village. A huge seven - tiered tower about one hundred feet high which guards the eastern entrance presents an imposing sight. The temple, occupies an area of about $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres; it is 316' from east to west and 210' from south to north. Massive walls, surrounding the temple on all the four sides, offer protection. The Main entrance leads to a second tower of three tiers which is 60 feet high.

The presiding deity is Neelamegha Perumal who gives darshan in a standing pose with Sridevi and Bhudevi on either side. The images of Dandaka Maharishi and Garuda are found in the two extremes. However, the cynosure of all eyes is the Utsavar or

the festival idol. It is said that the bewitching charm of the idol would even enamour Manmatha, the God of love. The nomenclature of the Utsavar is Sowri Raja Perumal. Giving him company are the four Nachiars, - Sridevi, Bhudevi, Padmini and Andal. The Sthalapurana states that Garuda was blessed by the Lord to remain near Him ; Garuda is seen in a state of supplication ; However he seems to be enjoying himself, eternally looking at the sublime countenance of the Lord. The metal images of Selvar, Santhana-krishnan and Sudarshan (Chakkarathalwar) are also found. The tower located over the Sanctum (Vimanam) goes by the name of Utbalavataka. It is stated that pious rishis are performing penances within the Vimana and hence it is invisible to the devotee when he circumambulates the outerprakara. Another opinion states that the Vimana is so named because it is as lovely as a lily flower.

The Northern part of the Mahamantapa is known as the Tirumanjana Mantapam. It is here that the ceremonial bath of the festival idol is performed. The Palliarai, laid with marbles and mirrors presents a magnificent sight. On festive occasions, the Utsavar and the Nachiars are taken to this chamber. The shrine of Senai Mudaliar, the generalissimo of the Lord's forces and the keeper of his arms, is located nearby. Nardhana Krishna and the twelve devout Alwars are housed in separate shrines. In yet another sanctum Rama, Sita and Lakshmana give darshan to the devotees. In a spacious sanctum located to the right of the presiding deity, the Amman or the Thayar popularly known as Krishnapura Nayaki blesses the

pilgrims. The festival idol is called Kannapura Nayaki. On all Fridays this idol is taken round the temple accompanied by the religious ceremonies. The Sanctum, Ardha Mantapa and the Mahamantapa are laid with granite and present a grand spectacle. There is a separate sanctum for Andal.

Four sacred tanks (Theerthams) are associated with the temple. The huge tank measuring $450 \times 415'$, is located in front of the temple. This tank, known as Nitya Pushkarni, is considered highly sacred. The Sthalapurana states that all the sacred theerthams dwell here; so it imbibes their sacred qualities. A dip in this tank is believed to confer prosperity to the devotees. The bathing ghat here is known as Ksheerapti Pushkarni. Devout women who bathe in this ghat on the last day of Markazhi month and on the first two days of Thai month are believed to have been blessed with children. Situated on the western side of the temple is the Anantapila tank. It is through this tank that Adishesha came to worship the Lord. Another tank goes by the name of Boothavadan. It is here that a demon was created to cure a malady which had inflicted the Moon. On the Northern side of the temple is found another sacred theertha - Muthakaram. It was here that Uparisaravasu, a divine ruler who possessed the gift of moving from one world to another, was rescued from the under-world (Pathala.)

Vibhishana installed Vishnu in a lying pose at Srirangam. He sought to have a darshan of Vishnu in a standing pose and to witness his graceful manner of walk. Vishnu, pleased with his austere penance,

promised to appear before the devotees in a standing pose alongwith the Nachiars. He also promised to give a special darshan to Vibhishana on all New Moon days. This occasion known as Thirukaithala Sevai is celebrated on all New Moon Days with eclat. At this Kshetra, Indra worshipped the Lord and was absolved of Brahmahati (the sin of killing a Brahmin).

The presiding Deity holds his favourite weapon, the discus, as though it is about to be released (Prayoga pose). A spicy anecdote gives the answer to this posture. In the olden days the temple was impregnable surrounded as it was by seven imposing compound walls extending for about thirteen miles, upto the seacoast. The Chola ruler who was a Saivite fanatic was bent upon destroying the walls. His minister tried to dissuade him by saying "As long as Tiruvoimozhi and Ramayana exist Vaishnavism cannot be exterminated".

His advice fell on deaf ears. An ardent devotee, unable to brook the sight of the destruction of the walls, prayed fervently to the Lord to take action. The Lord was unmoved; Exasperated at his complacency, the devotee threw the cymbal at the Lord; the Presiding Deity was injured on the forehead. Immediately he hurled his discus which drove the Chola forces away. It is believed that the Deity bears the scar of the wound inflicted by the devotee even today.

It is said that a few centuries back, Rangabhatar, the archaka who was performing the daily rituals,

was fond of a courtesan. The archaka used to offer the garland first worn by the courtesan to the Lord. One day the Chola ruler happened to notice a fragment of human hair in the garland worn by the Lord. When questioned, the Archaka asserted that the hair belonged to God. It is stated that in order to save the archaka, God himself appeared with a wig. From then onwards he was given the sobriquet Sowri Rajan (Sowri - Wig).

Munaiyodharan pongal, a delicacy made of rice, ghee and dhal is offered to the deity every night as prasada. There are two versions regarding the origin of this pudding. Munaiyodharan, a poor devotee used to offer the pudding to the Lord every night, before the commencement of Ardhajama pooja. One day, due to unavoidable circumstances, he could not submit it in time. The crest-fallen devotee begged Vishnu to forgive the lapse and to accept the humble offering. At night he was awoken by the chiming of the bells. The entire passage from his home to the temple was strewn with particles of the delicacy offered by him. The aroma of ghee and dhal rent the air. God had accepted the offering. From that day onwards the pongal became the favourite offering to the Lord.

The other version is narrated in a slightly different manner. Munaiyodhara Pillai, a Chola feudatory, was entrusted with the onerous task of collecting taxes from twenty sub-divisions of the kingdom. Being a keen devotee of Vishnu, he resided at Thirukannapuram and took interest in the affairs of the temple. Viragadhi-

bogam, a maiden had held him in high esteem and showered affection upon him. When the country was in the grips of a famine, Munaiyodhara Pillai diverted the amount that he had collected as tax, for the welfare of the people. The chagrined Chola ruler chastised his feudatory. Viragadhibogam entreated the Lord to save him from the fetters, failing which she swore to embrace fire. The Lord of Tirukannapuram, appearing in his dream, pleaded with the Chola ruler to release Munaiyodhara. Viragadhibogam was delirious with delight. She offered Munaiyodhara the rice pongal to assuage his hunger. The feudatory was highly pleased with the Pongal and he offered it to the Lord. From then onwards it became the favourite offering to the Lord. The feudatory himself granted a tract of land for this purpose. It is held that the female figure found in the front Mantap is that of Viragadhibogam.

Elaborate arrangements have been made for the preparation of this delicacy. It is prepared with rice, dhal and ghee in the ratio of 3 : 2 : 1. Separate sets of vessels are maintained for its preparation. In the Mahamantap, near the dwarapalaka, the figure of Maniam Sowrirajan is housed. It is in his presence that the pongal is sold to the pilgrims.

Poojas are performed six times a day in accordance with the principles laid down in the Vaikanasa Agamam. Devotees can have a darshan of the Lord from 6 A.M. to 12 P.M. and from 4 P.M. to 9 P.M. A number of endowments have been created by numerous

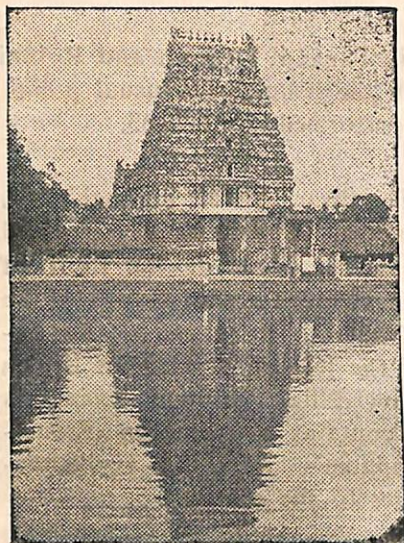
philanthropists for providing food to pilgrims. The temple owns about 430 acres of cultivable land in addition to a few shops and a rest - house for pilgrims. Among the Vahanas extant, mention must be made of palanquin, Anjaneya, Sesha, Garuda and Horse, some of which are plated with gold and silver.

The temple wears a festive look often. The twelve day Brahmotsavam celebrated in Vaikasi month (April - May) and the thirteen day Mahotsavam celebrated in Masi (February - March) are attended by a multitude of devotees. During these festivals the Lord's marriage with Padmini Nachiar is remembered. This episode is narrated in the Sthalapurana in a scintillating manner. Uparisaravasu, a ruler of the fishermen community, was trying to remove the grain from the paddy fields when a youthful watchman intercepted him. Later the watchman appeared in his true form as the Lord of Kannapuram. The ruler offered his daughter Padmini in marriage to the Lord. The festival idol of the temple holds his hand in such a way as to receive Padmini. During the Masi festival the festival idol is taken to Tirumalairayanpattinam the capital of his father - in - law. The fishermen accord a grand reception with the words 'Mappilai' ! (bridegroom). At the consummation of the Teppa Utsavam, sacred water is distributed to the devotees. Literary discourses, musical performances, etc mark the festivals.

The Tamil New Years' Day, Krishna Jayanthi, pavithrotsavam (September), Karthigai, Markazhi ten

day festival, Sankaranthi, 'Panguni Uttiram and Rohini Utsavam are celebrated in the temple with usual pomp. Kumbhabishekham was performed on 6-9-63.

Among the Alwars, Perialwar, Andal, Kulasekharar, Nammalwar and Tirumangai Alwar have composed devotional hymns lauding the deeds of the Lord of Kannapuram. The hymns have given a pen picture of the fertility of the place. Next to Srirangam, Kannapuram is the recipient of the largest number of hymns of the Alwars. Divya kavi Pillai Perumal Aiyangar's '108 Tirupathi Anthathi' contains a poem on Kannapuram. Mr. T. S. Rajagopalan's work on Tirukannapuram pays glowing tributes to the centre.



TIRUCHERAI

At a distance of - 12- kilometres from Kumbakonam on the main road leading to Tiruvarur lies a venerable kshetra, called Tirucheraikulam. It is one among the - 108- Divya Tirupathis of the Vaishnavites. Mahavishnu resides in the renowned temple as Saranatha Perumal. Tirucheraikulam is also a noted Saiva kshetra where a temple dedicated to Senneriappa Iswara is situated. It is one among the Saivite centres located on the Southern bank of Cauvery eulogised by the Saivite savants - Tirugnana Sambandar and Tirunavukkarasar.

SARANATHA PERUMAL TEMPLE

The Vaishnavite temple with a huge well-proportioned tower perched over the entrance and the Sara pushkarni, a lake of substantial dimensions located in front of it could never fail to lure any visitor as soon as he

enters the village. The tower soars to a height of 120 feet. The temple occupying an area of 1.5 acres (380' long and 234' broad) is embellished by a multitude of shrines and mantaps and a second tower of three tiers. In a sublime sanctum guarded by two awe-inspiring dwarapalas, Saranatha perumal, the presiding Deity appears in a standing pose. The tirumugamandala of the twelve feet-tall deity faces east. To His north, Mother Cauvery and to His south Sage Markandeya are accommodated. The radiance of Utsavar Saranatha, accompanied by Bhudevi, Sridevi and Neeladevi would dazzle the eyes of the devotee. The graceful idols of Santhanakrishna and Selvar are also housed in the same shrine.

To the right side of the main Sanctum Sanctorum is located the shrine of Saranayaki Thayar. The image of the Thayar (both Moolavar and Utsavar) is in a sitting posture. Sri Rajagopalaswamy in the company of Rukmani and Satyabhama occupies a separate shrine in the Kalyan Mantap situated in the second prakara. In the same Mantap Thiruvencatamudayan (Lord Venkatesa) has found a shrine. The exquisite metal images of Sri Rama, Sita and Lakshmana housed in yet another shrine are very charming. The Mahamantap has a shrine for Narasimha and Lakshmi. Kaliyamardhana, Balasaranatha, Senai Mudaliar, Manavala Munigal, Ramanuja, Pillai Logacharya and the twelve Alwars have also found a place in the temple.

Brahmandapurana (first six chapters of Maheswara Naradasamvardha) and Bhavishyat Purana (chapters 68-72,

Maheswara Narada Samvardha, Madhya Kanda) give a graphic account of the Tirucheraï Mahatmeeya. It is stated that Lord Shiva narrated the significance of the Sara Kshetra to Narada. On the eve of the Cosmic Deluge Mahavishnu had ordained Brahma to safeguard the sacred texts like the Vedas, the Agamas, the Sastras and the Puranas in an enormous earthen pot. Brahma felt highly exasperated when all the pots engendered by him for this purpose broke into pieces. He apprised Mahavishnu of his hopelessness. Mahavishnu said, "Among the holy Vaishnav Centres I have great esteem for twelve Kshetras - Srirangam, Tirupathi, Kanchipuram, Tirunarayanapuram, Srimushnam, Naimisaranya, Kumbakonam, Vrishabathri, Ayodhya, Padarikashram and Sara Kshetra. Out of these twelve I regard Sara Kshetra as the most sacrosanct Sthala. O Brahma! the hallowed centre is purged by nine sacred theerthas among which the Sara Pushkarni is the most consecrated. Kindly sojourn at Sara Kshetra for a while and have a dip in the Sara Pushkarni. Carve out a pot with the clay found in that holy lake. Your mission would be successful".

Brahma journeyed to Sara Kshetra forthwith. The sublime sanctity of the centre enthralled his heart. He had a bath in the sacred Sara Pushkarni and shaped a huge pot out of the clay found in the tank. To his amazement the earthen pot stood firm. As per Mahavishnu's injunction Brahma stored the sacred texts in the pot and safeguarded them. It is firmly believed that seven Rishis - Brigu, Sowraga, Vyasa, Markandeya, Parasara, Vamadeva and Baninthrathiya perform a penance on the bank of the theertha to preserve its pristine sanctity.

The seven River Goddesses - Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswathi, Narmada, Sindhu and Cauvery assembled at the foot of the Vindhyas in the form of maidens of bewitching charm. While they were playing joyfully, a Gandharva named Viswavasv who happened to pass by tendered his salutation to the maidens and disappeared. The maidens were not sure as to whom the salutation was proffered. This led to a controversy among the maidens regarding their relative greatness.

The majority agreed that Ganga was the most eminent among them. However, Cauvery disputed the opinion of the majority. The maidens sought an answer from Brahma who acquiesced in the opinion of the majority. "Mahavishnu descended upon the world in the form of a pygmy Brahmachari (Vamana) and solicited a small strip of land measured by his strides from Mahabali. Immediately Vamana transfigured himself as the gigantic Trivikrama to measure the Earth and the Heaven in two strides. The whole world stood aghast at the sight of the all pervasive form. The ablution ceremony of his feet was performed with the waters of the Ganga. Ganga whose waters were thus purified by Mahavishnu's feet attained a position of supremacy among the rivers". These were the words uttered by Brahma.

Brahma's sagacious words blasted Cauvery's pride. It only strengthened her resolve to surpass Ganga. She performed an ardent penance to fulfil her desire. Brahma, immensely gratified by the penance, granted her an equal status with Ganga. A mere parity would not satiate her unquenchable thirst for a higher status.

She undertook yet another penance subjecting herself to severe austerities. Brahma counselled her to repair to Sarakshetra and to propitiate Saranatha. In pursuance of the wise words, Cauvery had a dip in Sara Pushkarni and performed an ardent penance on the banks under an Arasa Vriksha. Mahavishnu appeared in the form of a suckling and sat upon the lap of Cauvery. Cauvery was smart enough to realise the august presence of Mahavishnu and beseeched him to reveal his true form. Thereupon the Inscrutable One exhibited his resplendent form. One of his lotus-like hands clutched the Panjajanya which could sound like a Rajahamsa calling from amidst a cluster of lotus flowers; another hand held Sudarshana which could disperse even an assemblage of mighty foes; he wore gorgeous shining pitambara which could dazzle the eyes of the devotee. Besides him were present Garuda, Sridevi, Bhudevi and Neeladevi. Inebriated with the nectar of bliss emanating from the lotus-feet of the Lord, Cauvery stood in trepidation and was caught up in the powerful sentiment of God-love. With horripilation all over the body, with tears rolling in torrents from her eyes and with the flood of God love overpowering her, she looked dazed. Mahavishnu revealed to her his Dasavatars; He promised to dwell at Sarakshetra eternally and to bless the devout who happened to visit the hallowed spot. Cauvery was granted supremacy over Ganga to her immense joy. At the South Western corner of Sara pushkarni, a separate shrine exists for Cauvery who is seen embracing the child (Vishnu). The images of Brahma and Mahavishnu are enshrined in the same sanctum.

On the occasion of Sri. Rama's coronation Vibhishana was presented with the sacrosanct Sri Ranga Vimana. While he was proceeding towards Sri Lanka he placed it on the banks of the river Cauvery. After performing the routine poojas he tried to lift the Vimana. To his bewilderment, the Vimana remained unmoved. Mahavishnu presented himself before Vibhishana and apprised him of his desire to resort at that spot under Ranga Vimana and to watch the Brahmotsava conducted at Tirucheraï. These facts are recorded in Sri Ranga Mahatmceeyam.

Realising the futility of worldly life, Markandeya yearned to attain eternal salvation from the cycle of birth. He performed a penance at Tirucheraï and acquired divine grace. The image of Markandeya has found a place in the Sanctum-Sanctorum by the side of Saranatha perumal.

Satyakirti, a Chola ruler of repute was not blessed with a child for a long time. He sojourned at Sara kshetra, had a bath in the pushkarni and propitiated Mahavishnu. By the grace of the Lord his consort gave birth to a child of glowing charm. The grateful ruler constructed a Swarnavimana over the Central shrine and renovated the Mantaps. He also fabricated a number of choultries for the welfare of pilgrims. A splendid Brahmotsava was celebrated with eclat in the Tamil month of Chithraï. Not being satisfied with these gifts, he donated a half of his kingdom for the maintenance of the temple. A barbaric hunter worshipped Saranatha at this kshetra and obtained bliss.

There is a spicy anecdote regarding the origin of the shrine of Rajagopalaswamy in this temple. Alagiya Manavala, the Maratha ruler of Tanjore was a steadfast devotee of Shri Rajagopalaswamy who resides at Mannargudi. He had commissioned cartloads of granite for the reparation of the Rajagopalaswamy temple. Narasa Bhoopala, the astute minister of Alagiya Manavala was dedicated to Saranatha Perumal, whose temple he wanted to renew. He had utilised a small portion of the granite for this purpose. The Maratha ruler sought an explanation from his minister for his deed. Narasa Bhoopala tactfully constructed a shrine for Rajagopala at Thirucheraï and informed the ruler accordingly. The Maratha ruler felt elated; he himself undertook the task of renovating the temple of Saranatha. The images of Alagiya Manavala, his queen and Narasa Bhoopala adorn the pillars of the kalayana Mantap.

Tirumangai Alwar has lavished praise upon the bounteous Lord of Tirucheraï. He has offered his supplication to the Vaishnav servitors who are deeply immersed in Narayana consciousness. The Ashta prabhanda of Divya Kavi Pillai Perumal Aiyangar contains a poem on Tirucheraï. He entreats the people not to disgrace themselves by glorifying the vain and loathful wealthymen; instead, they could laud the greatness of the Omnipotent. Information regarding the endowments made to the temple can be gleaned from two inscriptions incised in the regime of the Chola Parakesarivarma (906-947) and Babasaheb of Mavadipallam (1728-35).

Parts of the temple were renovated periodically. A renovation was carried on between 1941 and 1943 and Mahakumbhabhishekham was performed on 30—3—67. Another Kumbhabhishekham was conducted in 1992. Poojas are conducted six times a day following the principles laid down in the Pancharathra Agamas. Thenkalai Achara Sampradayam is followed in matters of ceremonies and rituals. Tirumanjanam of Saranatha takes place on Full Moon Day, on Ekadasi day and on the first day of every month, while that of the Thayar is performed on all Fridays.

The annual Brahmotsavam is conducted on a grand scale in the Tamil month of Thai (January - February); on the day of the pushya asterisk the car festival is held; it was on this day that the Lord descended upon the world from Vaikuntam to bless Cauvery. This feature normally happens in a combination of Magara month in Pournami day and Thursday. The coincidence of Pournami, Pushya Nakshatiram and Thursday occurs once in twelve years. This day draws a large number of pilgrims, reminiscent of the Mahamaham festival of Kumbakonam. Other festivals like Tamil New Year's Day, Vaikasi Vasantha Utsavam, Adipuram, Jyeshtabisheka, Sri Jayanthi, Navarathiri and Vaikunta Ekadasi are also celebrated. The temple owns a massive ratha which ranks one among the three huge rathas found in this district. The temple owns about 140 acres of wet lands and 140 acres of dry lands.

The presence of the five consorts, Sridevi, Neeladevi, Bhudevi, Saranayaki Amman and Mahalakshmi in this

temple is a unique feature unnoticeable in any other Vaishnav temple. Saranatha holds padmam in his right hand. The Sthala had incorporated five divine elements-Perumal, Nachiar, Vimana, Theertha and Land and hence it is known as Tirucherai.

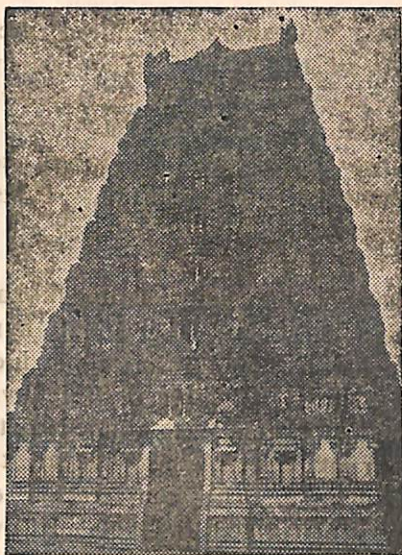
SENNERIAPPAR TEMPLE OR UDAYAR TEMPLE

The Siva temple dedicated to Senneriappar is located at a short distance from the Vaishnav temple. The extent of this temple is much lesser compared to the Saranatha temple. It also enjoys a much smaller income. But in sanctity it is in no way inferior. Markandeya had installed a linga in this temple which he worshipped everyday. That linga is accommodated in the inner Prakara of the temple. Dowmya Rishi too propitiated Lord Shiva at this place. Surya atoned for having participated in the sacrifice sponsored by Daksha. Every year the golden rays of the Sun grace the person of the Presiding Deity for three days in the month of Masi (February-March). Special worship is instituted in this temple in the month of Masi.

A beautiful lake formed by a drop of Ambrosia known as GNANAVAVI or Bindhusuda lies in front of the temple. A small three tiered gopuram had been constructed over the second entrance. Passing through a cluster of small mandaps one can have a darshan of the Presiding Deity Senneriappar or Sara Parameswara, a linga of well executed proportions. In the outer Prakara the shrine of Gnanavalli Ambal, the divine consort is located. The image of Sapthamathas, Saivite saints, Gajalakshmi, Balasubramania, Jyeshthadevi,

Kanni Vinayaka, Saneeswara and Surya are housed in the inner parts of the temple. The presence of three images of Durga and two of Chandeswara in this temple is a noteworthy feature. The outer walls of the main shrine are embellished by lovely sculptures of Nataraja, Vinayaka, Rishabaruda, Dakshinamurthy and Kalabhairava,

Tirugnanasambandar and Tirunavukkarasar have dedicated three decads of devotional hymns to the Lord of Tirucheraï. Two inscriptions incised in the fifth and the 27th regnal years of Tribhuvana Chakravarthy Kulothunga Choladeva allude to the grant of lands in favour of Tiruchenneri Udayar, the Presiding Deity of this temple. The consecration ceremony of this temple was performed in 1960. It owns about - 12 - acres of wet lands, a mere pittance when compared to the Saranatha temple. It is administered as a sub-temple of the Vaishnav temple.



MANNARGUDI

RAJAGOPALASWAMY TEMPLE

Towards the fag end of the Dwapara Yuga, two sagacious sages bearing the names Gopila and Gopralaya embarked upon a journey to Dwaraka to have a darshan of Lord Krishna. Narada, the roving sage met them enroute. He informed them that the Dwapara Yuga had reached its culmination and that Lord Krishna had returned to Vaikunta. The two rishis were extremely disillusioned. Narada bade them to repair to the Shenbaga forest situated on the banks of the Harithra river and perform a penance invoking Lord Krishna, by chanting the

Dwathashatsara mantra for one year. The endeavours of the sages bore fruit and Lord Krishna appeared before them. In compliance with their request he reiterated thirty two incidents that occurred during the Krishna Avatar. Ultimately He performed the Rasaleela in the Harithra river in the company of the Gopikas. At the completion of the Jalakrita, the Gopikas left the scene wearing their dress and ornaments. Finally Krishna was left with only a piece of cloth, a leaf and an ear-ring. Wearing these modest articles, He presented Himself before the sages and assured them that He would reside eternally at that place under the name Vidya Rajagopalan. This is the origin of the Rajagopalaswamy Temple of Mannargudi. Mannargudi is today a flourishing little town located in Thanjavur District and is well connected by transport with other parts of the State.

The consort of Bhrigu Rishi had the temerity to assist the Asuras in their encounter with the Devas. Mahavishnu inflicted a condign punishment for her effrontery by severing her head with his discus. Unable to brook the loss of his beloved, Bhrigu Rishi cursed Mahavishnu that He would also suffer the loss of His consort. On second thought he realised his folly of cursing the Almighty in haste. Bhrigu departed to Shenbagaranya to atone for his hasty deed. Pleased with his penance Mahalakshmi appeared in his ashram in the form of a suckling. The child grew under the paternal care of the rishi. When she attained the appropriate age, Mahavishnu made His appearance and married her. Even today Mahavishnu resides in a small shrine located on the banks of the tank called Tirupatkadal as Lakshminarayana.

Brahma was overcome by a sense of haughtiness as a result of which he lost his mental equilibrium. Acting upon the advice of his son Sanathkumara, he propitiated Mahavishnu at Shenbagaranya and regained his normal prowess.

Garuda was resolved to release his mother from thralldom. With this aim he endeavoured to secure the pot of ambrosia from the Heaven. Agni who was unaware of the true motive behind this essay, attempted to thwart his designs by intercepting Garuda. Incensed by his attitude Garuda cursed that Agni would lose his lustre and fire-power. Having realised his imprudence, Agni performed a penance invoking Mahavishnu to restitute the lost powers. The boon was granted.

Shenbagaranya was ruled by a king of Saurastrian origin called Rajasekhara. Once he launched an expedition to extirpate the wild animals that tormented the inhabitants. During the campaign, he felt exhausted and hungry. A Brahmin named Yajnasila provided him with food and water to satiate his appetite. As a token of gratitude Rajasekhara promised to give the Brahmin largesse when he visits his headquarters. However when Yajnasila came to the palace, Rajasekhara treated him with disdain. The infuriated Brahmin cursed the ruler to lose his mental equilibrium. Rajasekhara realised his mistake and surrendered at the lotus feet of the Lord. He performed an arduous penance on the banks of the Harithra river. By the grace of the Lord he regained his mental equilibrium. As a token of gratitude he constructed the prakaras, the mantaps and the shrine of the Thayar.

Swarnasikhamani, the son and the successor of Rajasekhara felt remorse at heart that he had not been blessed with a child. The Lord appeared in his lap as Santhanagopalakrishna and blessed him with a child. It is a practice even today that couples hold the idol of Santhanagopalakrishna in their lap for a brief period in the firm hope that children would be born to them. Muchukunda Chakravarthy too worshipped the Lord at this hallowed spot

It is stated in the Sthalapurana that eminent sages performed worship at Mannargudi during all the four yugas. In the Krudhayuga Brahma worshipped the Lord of Shenbagaranya. During the Thretha Yuga Lakshmi and Bhrigu rishi offered their obeisance. Towards the fag end of the Dwapara Yuga, Gopilar and Goprallyar performed a penance at this sacred Sthala. In the Kaliyuga monarchs like Kulothunga III, Rajasekhara, Achutappa Nayakar and Vijayaraghunatha Nayakar and luminaries like Manavala Munigal, Kshetragnar, Theagaraja and Muthuswamy Dikshitar have proffered worship here.

No less than nine sacred theerthas are associated with this hallowed centre. The Harithra river now shaped in the form of a capacious tank with an area of -23- acres is bigger in dimensions than the famous Kamalalayam tank of Tiruvarur. It is believed that the river was converted into a commodious tank at the instance of Lord Krishna to enable him to perform the Rasaleela here. The Gopis had applied themselves with turmeric and a variety of spices in profusion.

During the Rasa Leela, the spices and turmeric were dissolved in the water of the tank thereby changing its colour and odour. Therefore the name of Harithra was bestowed upon the river. It is regarded as the converging point of all the sacred rivers of the South. A dip in this Holy river especially in the month of Masi is considered to be very sanctimonious. This tank is located at a distance of one kilometre from the temple.

The Duruvasa Theertha named after the sapient sage is also located at a distance of one kilometre from the temple. It is on the banks of this tank that Duruvasa obtained benefaction from Mahavishnu. It is also known as Gajendra Moksha Theertha or elephant tank. A holy bath in the month of Ani is regarded sacred.

A bath in the Tirupatkadal Theertha on all Fridays in the month of Thai is of special importance. The Gopika Theertham otherwise known as Oma Kundam is found by the side of the road leading to Pattukottai. It was on its banks that Agni and the two wise sages Gopila and Goprallya performed poojas invoking the Lord. A holy bath in it on all the Wednesdays of the month of Purattasi is held sacrosanct. In a shrine located at the South West corner of this tank Vasudeva gives darshan alongwith the Nachiars. Devotees have a dip in the Rukmani Theertham on Mondays. On the day of the Pooram asterisk in the month of Adi, householders offer turmeric and kumkum to housewives. Offer of Kanni-kadanam on the same day is also considered sacred.

In addition to these sacred tanks mention could also be made of the Agnikunda theertha, Krishna

theertha, Sangu theertha and Chandra theertha. The Pambani river which flows from the northeast to the northwest in the form of a garland is also a theertha of significance.

The place was a dense forest comprising of sweet smelling Shenbaga trees, thereby earning the name Shenbagaranyam. The Shenbaga trees yielded so much perfume that even the bees could not smell it; hence it was called 'Vanduvapathi'. It was akin to Dwaraka, the capital of Lord Krishna in many respects. It had streets in the four directions facilitating the movement of the ratha during festivals. The sacred Harithra river served the kshetra like the Gomati river of Dwaraka. Lord Krishna repeated the avataric deeds that he performed at Dwaraka in front of the rishis. It was no surprise that the kshetra was called 'Dakshina Dwaraka'.

The Presiding Deity manifests himself as Vasudeva thereby earning the name of Vasudevapuri to this Sthala. The Utsavar presents Himself as Rajamannar and Rajagopalan thereby conferring the name of Rajamannargudi to this town. The town comprising of an area of 46 acres is replete with an astounding variety of temples and tanks. No doubt wise men referred to it as 'Mannargudi-temple and tank - fifty fifty'. The stupendous and charming walls of the temple, earned the name of 'beautiful walls of Mannargudi' to this town. It is one of the eight sthalas known as 'Swayam Viyaktha Kshetras' where Mahavishnu manifested Himself on his own accord.

The massive temple complex occupying an area of six square acres presents an enthralling sight with large prakaras, sixteen towers, seven mantaps and -24- shrines. All the four entrances are adorned by towering gopurams. It is a pity that the eleven-tiered tower, perched over the eastern entrance and raising to a height of 154 feet alone is in a good condition. It was renovated at a cost of Rs. 75000 prior to the consecration ceremony that took place on 18-12-66. All the other towers await renovation. The five prakaras known as Garbagriha prakara, Garuda prakara, Shenbaga prakara, Kasi prakara and Nachiar prakara are well marked. No less than seven well proportioned mantaps - Vallala Maharaja Mantap, thousand pillared mantap, Garuda Vahana Mantap, Yanai Vahana Mantap, Balcony Mantap, Vennai Thazhi Mantap and Punnai Vahana Mantap lend grandeur to the temple. The Punnai tree which serves as the Sthalavriksha has found a place in the Shenbaga prakara. Although the temple faces east, a few scholars are inclined to regard it as a west facing temple in the days gone by. A place called Maligaimedu exists in front of the west entrance. The rulers of Tanjore used to stay in a palace that existed here whenever they came to pay obeisance to the Lord. Evidences point out to the existence of a Sixth prakara which included a moat and a fortress. However, these evidences are not adequate to substantiate this theory.

The visitor could never fail to notice the -54- feet tall Garuda Sthamba located in front of the eastern entrance. It has a small shrine dedicated to Garudalwar atop, wherein Garudalwar presents Himself

with his hands held in supplication. It has been in existence for a long time withstanding the ravages of time. It is regarded as the handiwork of Tirumangai Alwar although evidences are not extant to authenticate this view. The sixteen pillared mantap nearby was previously utilised during the Utsavas.

The fifth prakara entitled Nachiar prakara contains a number of mantaps among which the Theagaraja Mantap is noteworthy. Theagaraja, the Utsavamurthy of Tiruvarur probably used to sojourn here during an annual festival. The fourth prakara known as Kasi Prakara has a Nandavanam where a special type of Jack tree has grown. The fruits of this tree are utilised in the preparation of a delicacy called Sahaharam which is offered to the Lord during the Vaikasi Visagam festival. This prakara has accommodated the shrines of Kurathalwar, Udayavar and Mahadesigar.

Shrines dedicated to Andal, Nammalwar, Manavalamunigal, Tirumangai Alwar, Kumudavalli Nachiar, Tondaradipodi Alwar and Anjaneya are located in the third prakara named Shenbaga prakara. A spacious shrine which includes an ardha mantap and a mahamantap located at the North west corner houses the vigraha of Rama. The image of Anjaneya is made of Salagrama.

The second prakara known as Garuda prakara has a mantap wherein Garuda is stationed alongwith his Utsavar. In the western part of the prakara Venugopala, Lakshmi Narayana, Lakshmi Narasimha, Anantha padmanabha and Gajendravarada have taken

up their positions in smaller shrines. At the north eastern corner Vishwaksena gives darshan both as Moolavar and Utsavar alongwith Suthravathi Devi.

The Sanctum Sanctorum constitutes the First prakara. The pillars of the mantap are embellished by a covering of copper plates. As at Srirangam, the images of Durga and Ganapathy are accommodated beneath the Main Vimana. Para Vasudeva, the presiding Deity gives darshan in a standing pose in the company of Sridevi and Bhudevi. The magnificent image of the Lord holding Sudarshan and panchajanya in his arms and bedecked with silver kavacham and resplendent ornaments could make the devotee's heart pulsate with joy.

The bewitching charm of the Utsavar idol whose nomenclature is Vidya Rajagopalan beggars description. He leans towards the cow stationed nearby and places his left hand on the shoulder of Satyabhama. He is clad in a very simple attire and wears a kundala in one ear and a dried leaf in another. His right hand clutches on to a golden rod to which is attached a whip with three folds.

Nearby are seen the four idols of Yahamurthy, Balamurthy, Snanamurthy and Sayanamurthy. The image of Navaneetha krishna is of unparalleled grace. He was worshipped with affection by one Balaswamy. The tiny and graceful image of Santhanakrishnan is also accommodated alongwith the other Utsavars.

The Divine consort named Hemambuja Nayaki (Sengamalavalli Thayar in Tamil) blesses the devotees in a capacious shrine located in the Shenbaga prakara. The huge Nriddha Mantap and Rohini Mantap found nearby are utilised for conducting Utsavas on certain occasions.

The temple had its origin in the days of Kulothunga Chola I (1072-1122 A. D.) who conferred the name of Kulothunga Vinnagar upon it. The ruler was a staunch devotee of Mahavishnu as indicated by his birudas Vishnuvardhana and Rajanarayana. The Sanctum Sanctorum, Ardhamantap and the third tower were created under his auspices. Achyutappa, the Nayak ruler of Tanjore (1580-1600) and his minister Govinda Dikshitar bestowed their personal attention upon the temple. Raghunatha Nayakar (1600-1634) constructed a mantap for the Main Deity. Vijayaraghava Nayakar (1633-73) revered Rajagopalaswamy as his family deity. Under his instructions granite stones were gathered from a place called Mamalai (located-50-miles away from Trichy) to construct five grand towers and mantaps which were embellished with elegant sculptures. He also shaped the steps leading to the Harithra river. He submitted a crown studded with diamonds and a kavacha adorned by nine precious gems to the Lord. His dedication to the Lord was such that he even constructed a temple for Rajagopalaswamy at Tanjore.

Vijayaraghava Nayakar was a munificent patron of art and letters. His court was illuminated by a galaxy of luminaries well versed in all subjects. In fact the flag of the ruler bore the image of Saraswathi, the Goddess of learning, Kamaraju Venkatapathi Somayaji,

the author of Vijayaraghava Chandrika, Konedikshitar, the author of Vijayaraghava Kalyana, Kalakavi the inditor of Rajagopala Vilasa, Purushotham Dikshitar the composer of Annadana Natak and Kshetragnar the author of Pathangal adorned his court. Poetess like Shenbagavalli, Kasturi, Sasirekha, Mohanasundari and Krishnaji besides the queen Anangajamma contributed their mite to the literary efflorescence of the times. Most of these outpourings lavished encomiums upon the Lord of Mannargudi.

Vijayaraghava Nayakar assumed pompous titles like Lachavipra Annadeda, Sahityaraya, Veerakanda Poondan, Sahityabhoja and Sangeethajyothi. His adoration of Rajagopalaswamy earned for him the sobriquet 'Mannardasa'.

A pillar found in the Vadya Mantap contains the sculptural representations of Achutappa Nayakar, Vijayaraghava Nayakar and his queen Shenbagalakshmi holding their hands in a state of supplication. During the festivals the Utsavar image is placed in front of these images. The Archakas laud the names of these rulers in honour of the services rendered by them. Another pillar situated in the Mahamantap reveals the images of Govinda Dikshitar and the Nayak ruler offering Godhan, Thuladhan and Swarnamerudhan to the Lord. Govinda Dikshitar wears Vibhuti on his forehead while the Nayaka rulers wear the Tiruman mark.

The Brahmandapurana contains a chapter on Shenbagaranya Kshetra. The Sanskrit version was published in 1904 and its Tamil translation in 1959. Eight chapters of Uttarakanda dwell on the sanctiness of Vishnu Kshetra. In the Aranyaparva of Mahabharata

Pulastya rishi reveals to Bheeshma the significance of the Shenbagaranya. Passing references to this hallowed kshetra are found in Harivamsa, Seshadharma, Sriranga Purana and Skandapurana (Narakasurakanda). The temple has given a fillip to the emergence of a number of religious works in Tamil and Sanskrit. Gopalavimsadhi of Vedanta Desigar, Rajagopala Navarathna maliga and Rajagopala Mahotsavanugrahamanigai of Theagaraja Magi, Mannargudi Rajagopala Tirupalli Ezhuchi of Athreya Ramaseshan, Rajagopala Vilasam of Sengal Vakalakavi, Mannarudasa vilasa of Ranga-rajammal, Hemambuja Nayaki Swayamvaram of Vijaya-raghava Nayak (in Telugu) and Vishnu Pallaki of the Maratha ruler Shahji, laud the qualities of the Lord of Mannargudi. Thena Prabhanda composed in Sanskrit, Rajamannar Mohanapallu, Rajagopala Pethamulu, Kirthanas of Theagarajaswamigal, Muthuswamy Dikshitar, Moovalur Sabapathy Iyer and Kshetragnar, 32 dyanaslokas of Swarama Sigamani Maharaj pay great respects to the Lord of Mannargudi. Manavala Munigal has composed Gopala Vimsadhi, Kamala Sthothra and Rajagopala Mangalam revealing his dedication to the Presiding Deity of Mannargudi. He has also dedicated a few hymns composed by Nammalwar to Rajagopala of Mannargudi. In addition a number of abridged versions of the Sthalapurana have been written in Tamil for the benefit of the devotees.

About seven inscriptions incised during the reign of Chola monarchs like Kulothunga I, Tribhuvana Chakravarthy Rajarajadeva, Rajendra Choladeva and Konerirmaikondan and the Nayak ruler Achutapp

have been deciphered by the archeologists. In the reign of Rajaraja, a complaint was lodged by the residents of the harassment of the revenue officials who collected taxes at their will and pleasure. The members of the Sabha and the Mahasabha reached an agreement after due deliberations about the amount of taxes payable by the farmers. Konerinmaikondan granted taxfree land for the conduct of various festivals. In the twenty first regnal year of Rajendra Chola III, land was granted for the benefit of Manavala Munigal and his disciple Peria Piratti. The Deity is referred to as Kulothunga Chola Vinnagarathu Alwar, Vanduvapathi Mannar and Rajadhiraja Vinnagara Perumal in some of the epigraphs.

Poojas are conducted seven times daily adhering to the principles enunciated in the Agamas. A large number of festivals are celebrated here throughout the year. The Chithrai kodai festival, Vaikasi Vasanta Utsavam, Ani Teppotsavam, Adi Pura Utsavam, Avani Pavithrotsavam, Purattasi Navarathri festivals, Aippasi Kolatta festival and Margazhi Dolotsavam are celebrated on a grand scale for ten days each. The Brahmotsavam is conducted for -18- days in the month of Panguni with eclat. The other monthly festivals are also celebrated with gaiety.

A number of mutts like the Vanamamalai Mutt, Ahobila Mutt, Sethubhava Mutt and Ondhiar Mutt exist in this sacred town. Temples dedicated to Naganathaswamy, Gopinatha Perumal, Meenakshi Sundarar, Kailasanathar, Anjaneya, Vinayaga and Mariamman are also found in various parts of the town. □



DENKANIKOTA

BETRAYASWAMY TEMPLE

LORD VENKATESWARA is revered as an Omnipotent Deity who confers boons upon the earnest devotees. No doubt zealots throng Tirupathi in multitudes. In order to fulfil the yearnings of the worshippers he has descended from His hilly abode to accomplish numerous miracles and to reside at a number of Holy Kshetras. One such hallowed spot is Denkanipuram where he appeared in the guise of a hunter. Today this town is known as Denkanikota (Thenkanikottai in Tamil). It is located at a distance of 20 kilometres from Hosur, in the Dharmapuri District. It is well served by buses from Hosur, Harur and other significant towns of the District besides Bangalore. The temple is situated two kilometres away from the Bus stand, at a remote, serene corner of the town.

Eight Chapters of Skandapurana composed by Vedavyasa have panegyricized the sanctimonious spot. Maharnavan, the brother of Kubera's maternal grandfather indulged in an arduous penance at Gokarnam invoking Lord Brahma. Brahma conferred inexpugnability upon the Yaksha as a reward for his perseverance. Spurred by the newly acquired strength the Yaksha went berserk reducing the celestials to dust. He tormented them so frequently that he was nicknamed 'Deva Gandakan'. (The Harrier of the Devas)

Once Devagandakan, transfigured as a tiger endeavoured to frustrate, the penance conducted by Athri Maharishi. The exasperated sage cursed the Yaksha to lose his pristine form. Athri also decreed that the Yaksha would be redeemed from the curse when Lord Venkateswara struck him with His Mace.

Kanva Rishi had chosen the thicket located on the banks of river Malini as his abode. Devoid of vegetation and sources of water the forest lay barren. Birds and animals hardly existed there Kanva Rishi was unable to conduct his daily rituals. Sanatkumara counselled him to shift his ashram to the salubrious spot situated on the northern banks of the Cauvery at a distance of 5 yojanas from Narayanagiri. Accordingly Sage Kanva reached the sacred region where Athri Rishi had performed austerities sometime back. He ensconced himself in a pretty ashram and commenced a yagna.

Devagandaka did not spare Kanva Rishi. He began to nettle the sage by his obstruent methods.

A divine voice emanating from heaven directed the wearied sage to invoke Lord Venkateswara. Kanva imprecated the Lord to extirpate the malevolent yaksha. Lord Venkateswara issued out of His glorious abode at Tirupathi, seated on his favourite vehicle Garuda. Ornaments of diverse and queer nature adorned his person. He presented himself in the guise of a hunter grasping the puissant Saranga (bow) and the ponderous mace called Denkani in his hands. The celestials formed his faithful retinue. The clangour of his bow reverberated, thereby earning the name of Dhanurgiri to the Hills. Devagandaka came to grips with the Lord. At the onset the Lord in consonance with His appearance hunted down a few turbulent beasts. The battle was evenly contested. Finding his adversary unrelenting Devagandaka resorted to unfair means. Ultimately he charged upon the hunter in a bid to slay him. Thereupon the Lord pommelled the yaksha with his mace named Denkani. Blood gushed out of the wound in profusion. The yaksha obtained not only redemption from the curse but also Gnana. Devagandaka beseeched the Lord that the place be named Denkanipuram in reminiscence of this incident. Kanva was blessed with the darshan of Lord Venkateswara in His resplendent form. He accepted the sobriquet 'Mrugyanatha' or Betrayaswamy (the Lord Hunter). He also condescended to reside eternally in the same form at Denkanipuram.

A sacred Theertha known as Sundari Theertha is located to the South - East of the shrine. Sakunthala the fosterdaughter of Kanva Rishi was engaged in a penance on its banks, seeking the blessings of

Mahalakshmi. She fashioned an image of Mahalakshmi out of the sands with her own hands. After propitiating the Devi punctiliously she used to dissolve the image in the sacred theertha. One day Mahalakshmi appeared in her luminant form seated upon a radiant lotus, and assured her that her aspirations would be fulfilled. Sakunthala secured the hand of a worthy suitor. (Dushyantha)

The hallowed shrine along with the Deity did not have adequate patrons in course of time. Consequently the Shrine and the Deity were buried beneath the earth. The holy spot was inhabited by reprobate hunters who preyed upon human flesh. The Pandava warrior Arjuna during his theertha yathra sojourned at this place. A group of holymen narrated the past glory of Kanvashram to Arjuna. Betrayaswamy appearing in his dream indicated to him the place where he lay buried and commissioned Arjuna to construct a temple there. Arjuna in pursuance of the Lord's behest overwhelmed the iniquitous hunters. He unearthed the magnificent idol of Betrayaswamy. A massive temple complex comprising of mantaps, towers and vimanas was created. Dhananjeya set up colonies of virtuous and zestful adherents around the temple. He also provided munificently for the regular conduct of poojas, utsavams and periodical festivals. After overseeing these arrangements Arjuna left the place. All these events have been narrated in the Sthala-purana.

In later times 'Ballalaraya' a scion of the Paligar family maintained suzerainty over this region. He was virtually the defacto ruler of this area and possessed

pompous epithets like 'Poosandar'. Later Haisala Jagadevaraya, a feudatory of the Vijayanagar Monarch held sway over this territory. Probably the impregnable 'Royavellur' fortress was constructed at his instance. In 1652 the representative of the Maratha feudatory Itapel Rao annexed this region. In 1653 the ruler of this area was Chandrasekhara Rao. The Udayars of Mysore held the reins of Government for sometime. In 1768 a British commander known as M. R. Casby held authority at this place.

A Vaishnavite votary named Jananyacharya (Ayiswamy) who hailed from Melkote (Thirunarayana puram) has dedicated doxological hymns to Betrayaswami. Even to-day the descendants of his family officiate in various capacities as Dharmakarthas and Sthalacharya Purushas at the temple. The members of the clan referred to as 'Kitambi' who claim lineage from Athri Rishi have been serving as Sthanikas for nearly twenty generations. Vaishnavites hailing from a sacred kshetra named Thiruvellarai located near Srirangam continue to discharge certain sacerdotal functions for nearly fifteen generations. Bhattacharyas who have migrated from a place called 'Viranakunnam' in Chengai-Anna district attend to the daily poojas. When the threat of desecration at the hands of the Moslem marauders was causing apprehension and consternation among the devotees, a pious crusader named Venkatapathy Rayar stoically carried the festival image of the Lord on his back to the jungles. He also ensconced the Presiding Deity from the eyes of the Moslem buccaneers. The descendants of this illustrious devotee officiated as Village officials for a long time. The

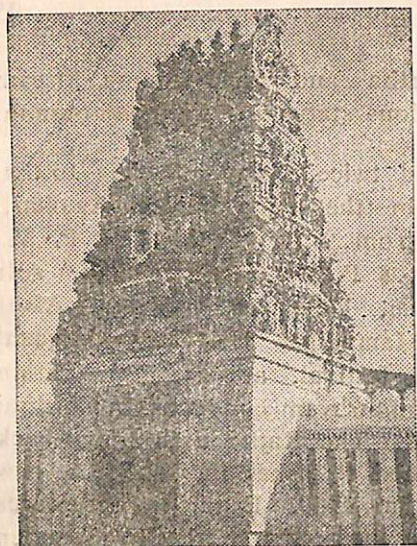
Vaisya community of this region have submitted precious ornaments to the Lord. They have also constructed a number of mantaps within the precincts of the temple. Thus members of all the four varnas have contributed their mite to the temple.

A five tiered tower crowned with five kalasams is perched over the eastern entrance. It bears ample testimony to the Hoysala style of architecture. The graceful tank named Swamy pushkarni occupying an area of 220 square feet is located in front of the temple. The prakara is 235 feet long. The eastern compound wall is 244 feet long while the southern wall is 204 feet long. The area of the temple is one acre.

The Presiding Deity, Sri Betrayaswamy presents Himself in a standing pose. He is an exact replica of Lord Venkateswara of Tirumalai Hills. His comeliness is further augmented by ornate and dazzling ornaments. On either side Sri Devi and Bhu Devi give darshan to the devotees. A spacious sanctum situated to the south west of the Eastern gopuram accommodates the Thayar whose nomenclature is Soundaryavalli Nachiar. The image of Sri U.V. Venkatadri who renovated a substantial part of the temple is found in front of the main sanctum. The Alvars, Vedanta Desikar, Kanva Rishi, Manavala Munigal and Ramanuja have been housed in the interior parts of the temple. Venugopala in the company of Rukmani and Satya Bhama, Rama accompanied by Sita and Lakshmana and Vira Anjaneya have occupied separate shrines. Even Vignesvara has found a place near the tower. A number of mantaps and miniature shrines, are found interspersed outside the temple. The Chakra

Theertha, Sundari Theertha and Sanatkumara Stream are accorded sanctimonious status in the sthalapurana.

Poojas are organised twice a day adhering to the injunctions laid down in the Pancharathra Agamas. The temple is open from 9 A. M. to 12-30 P. M. and from 5 P.M. to 8 P.M. Festivals like Adi Puram, Vaikunta Ekadasi, Udayavar Utsavam, Alvar Utsavam, Manavala Mamunigal Utsavam, Margazhi Day festival and Night festival, are organised within the limitations. The Brahmotsavam conducted in Chithrai includes the car festival. The Ratha used long back was accidentally consigned to ashes in 1906. A new Ratha was completed in 1909. Exquisite sculptures adorn this Ratha which possesses 6 wheels. Wooden Vahanas like Garuda, Horse and Elephant are also existent. On auspicious occasions, adorers even from Karnataka visit this temple to seek the blessings of Sri Betrayaswamy. □



KARAMADAI

RANGANATHAR TEMPLE

The area comprising of parts of the present Quied-e-Millet, Coimbatore, Periyar and Salem districts was classified as Kongunad in historic times. Here existed a dense forest abounding in a type of tree called Karai. Consequently the region itself was referred to as 'Karaivana'. A tribe known as Thottiar had their settlements here. They kept their body and soul together by rearing cattle. One of them owned a cow which was capable of yielding abundant quantity of milk. However for the past few days it hardly yielded any milk. Suspecting some foul-play the tribesman surreptitiously followed the cow to the, pasture - land and watched its activities with argus' eyes. He was nonplussed when the cow emptied its milk over an ant - hill located by the side of a bush. The bewildered tribesman endeavoured to dig out the ant - hill with a crow - bar. Blood gushed out of the

ant - hill in profusion. He lost his eyesight as he collapsed on the ground. His kindred who had cognizance of the incident, met their preceptor Vedavyasabhattar and sought counsel. Acting under his behest a small temple was constructed to accommodate the Almighty who appeared at this hallowed spot on his own accord.

A minor controversy arose among the tribesmen regarding the identity of the Swayambumurthy. On the basis of its shape a section, considered it as a manifestation of Lord Shiva while others identified it as Mahavishnu. Mahavishnu appearing in the dream of a devotee named Pitchu Mandradiar bade him to cover the Deity with sandal paste before dawn. While the sandalpaste was being applied Mahavishnu gave darshan with the conch and the discus in his hands. This is the genesis of the Ranganatha temple of Karamadai. Karamadai is a modest town lying on the Coimbatore - Mettupalayam highway at a distance of 23 kilometres from Coimbatore. The temple is located at a stones' throw from the bus stand.

The temple is of modest dimensions occupying an area of one acre and comprises of one prakara and several shrines. The Main entrance which faces the east is not garnished by any tower. However the northern entrance serving as the Swargavasal has a charming -40- feet tall gopuram perched over it. It was constructed under the auspices of Mr. Thiruvengatavan Chettiar of Udagamandalam in 1944. Vimanas embellished by lovely stucco images of the deities lend pulchritude to the temp'le.

Agamas have prescribed only three forms of Mahavishnu that grace the sanctums of the temples. the standing, the sitting and the reclining forms. Normally Mahavishnu in the form of Ranganatha presents Himself in a reclining pose. Exceptionally Ranganatha, the Presiding Deity of Karamadai is shaped like a linga and wears the Vaishnav Tiruman mark. This is indeed a rare spectacle found nowhere else. It is stated that Bhrihaspathi performed an arduous penance. In accordance with his wishes Mahavishnu appeared in this peculiar form. The nomenclature of the Utsavar is Karaivana Venkatesa.

The southern prakara accommodates the two-armed Ranganayaki Thayar whose charming countenance draws a large congregation of devotees. The Utsavar endowed with Chathurbujas sits in a padmasana pose. The 2½ feet tall figure of Andal is housed in another shrine. Anjaneya bedecked with silver kavacha presents a picture of a humble servitor in a small shrine. Paravasudeva, Santhanakrishna and the twelve Alvars are also lodged in the temple.

It is a common practice to embellish the goshtas on the outer walls of the sanctum with certain divine sculptures in Shiva temples. In the Ranganatha temple three exquisite images occupy the niches on the outer walls of the sanctum. The classic portrayal of a damsel playing upon a Veena is remarkable for its grace and charm. Her headdress, drapery and physical features are deftly etched. A parrot seems to enjoy herself sitting upon her shoulders.

The figure of Kothandarama, wielding the bow and the arrows is also a worthy specimen. Venugopala

seems to play a melodious note that held even the cattle that surrounded him spell-bound. These three sculptures reveal workmanship of a very high order. Sculptures depicting the Dasavataras adorn the pillars of the Mahamantap. The icon of Azhagu Madhava Perumal housed in the Ardhmantap was secured from a place called Bellary. Even Vinayaka has obtained a place on a pillar.

The Vaishnav Guru Parambarai Vaibhav which traces the ecclesiastical history of Vaishnavism gives a vivid account of the lives and the achievements of the Vaishnav savants. It states that Sri Ramanuja, unable to withstand the persecution launched by Kulothunga Chola migrated towards the present day Karnataka. During his journey he sojourned for three days at Karaivana. The inhabitants accorded a warm reception to the devotee and proffered honey and corn.

'The Six Thousand Padi' a commentary on Nammalwar's Tiruvoimozhi delineates how Malik Kafur, the Generalissimo of Alauddin Khilji desecrated the Hindu temples and denuded them of their valuable icons and jewellery. The devotees of Srirangam managed to transmit the Utsavar idols to places of safety. The idol of Alagiya Manavala Perumal was concealed at Karamadai for about a year. Later it was returned to Srirangam after an arduous journey.

Small water ponds were found at Karaivana then and there. Therefore the place was called Karaimadai. Karai tree serves as the Sthala Vriksha of the temple. Barren women who consume a paste made out of

the leaves of the tree and turmeric are blessed with children. Tirumalai Nayak, the ruler of Madurai was afflicted by an abscess named Rajapilavai. Unable to withstand the pain caused by the carbuncle, the ruler offered worship at various temples. He also propitiated Lord Ranganatha of Karaimadai. By His blessings the ruler was relieved of his agony. The grateful Tirumalai Nayak arranged for the construction of the temple in 1639. The discovery of an inscription of Tirumalai Nayak near Karamadai lends credence to this legend.

The Garuda Theertha situated near the temple is believed to be sacrosanct. Mahalakshmi had commissioned Garudalwar to guard the entrance to her residence. True to her words Garudalwar refused entry even to Mahavishnu. A quarrel ensued as the result of which Garudalwar pushed Mahavishnu down. Later Garudalwar realised the magnitude of his folly and expiated for his sin by performing a penance. The theertha engendered by Garudalwar is Garuda Thertha. Vedavyasabhatar, the mentor of the thottiaris while endeavouring to trace the idol of Ranganatha had a dip in this theertha. Standing neck-deep in the holy tank, he propitiated Mahavishnu to guide him on the correct path. A divine voice emanating from the sky bade him to follow the Thulasi leaves that lay scattered in front of the theertha. Accordingly Vedavyasabhatar followed the thulasi leaves and traced the image of Ranganatha.

The Karamadai Sthalapurana containing -4- chapters was composed in prose by Mr. S. T. Ranganathachariar and published in 1942. It gives a lucid account of

Mahalakshmi's divine wedding. It also elucidates how Brahma, Indra, Kubera and Garuda propitiated Lord Ranganatha in the four yugas. Kanda Swamikal of the Kaumara Mutt, Sravanapuram has written a Sthalapurana consisting of -450- verses. He has also penned a collection of -102- hymns entitled Rangana-thamalai. The Upapurana of the Bhargavapurana contains a passing reference to Karamadai.

Poojas are performed three times every day adhering meticulously to the injunctions laid down in the Pancharathra Agamas. The temple owns valuable ornaments including an opulent necklace studded with precious gems, most of which were donated by pious devotees. It also possesses 11.5 acres of cultivable land located in two villages named Bettakarai and Senganakarai. In addition to the rent collected from a few shops and gardens belonging to the temple, considerable revenue is received by way of Hundi collection, archana and abhisheka charges. Vahanas like horse, chapparam, swan, sesha, Lion and Hanuman in addition to a silver coated Garuda are used during the festivals. Further a lovely chariot and a palanquin are also used in the temple. Among the annual festivals conducted in this temple, Vaikunta Ekadasi, Athyayana Utsavam, Margazhi day and night festivals, Navarathri and Karthigai Deepam deserve special mention. The birthdays of Manavala Munigal, Nammalwar and Ramanuja are also celebrated.

The Brahmotsavam conducted in Masi is a grand affair. On the fifth day the Tirukalyana Utsavam is celebrated. The adjoining hill contains a temple in which the native deities Peddathamman and Thulasi

Amman are housed. An arrow made of silver and measuring $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length and popularly known as 'Ramabhana' is given a ceremonial bath with water taken in a Valampuri conch by archakas who had received the Lord's benedictions. Devotees honoured as 'Dasas' carry the Ramabhana to receive the bride at the foot of the hill. The archaka places the Ramabhana upon the head of the devotees who are afflicted by incurable diseases and bless them. The aggrieved persons are relieved of their distress by the grace of the Almighty. The car festival takes place two days after the Tirukalyana Utsavam. The ratha is of sizeable proportions and is adorned by delicate sculptures of a varying nature. Episodes from Ramayana commencing from Narad blessing Sage Valmiki to Ramapattabishekha are portrayed in the form of miniature sculptures.

On the day of the car festival three types of Sevas—Thanneer Seva, Kavala Seva and Panda Seva are organised here. The active participants in these Sevas are honoured as Dasas. The Dasas are spread throughout the length and breadth of our country. They are enrolled in front of the archakas irrespective of the distinctions of caste, race and creed. The participants in the Sevas are draped in yellow garbs and cover their heads with cloth. In addition they hold eighteen types of insignias like Thulasi garland, cane, chank and discus. Devotees present them with rice, fruits and vegetables.

A Japanese lady named Mary Mitchi presented an elephant named Andal to the temple. During the British regime the engineer entrusted with the task of laying the railway line prepared the plan in such a way that would be detrimental to the temple and the tank.

He had a vision of Mahavishnu (mounted on a horse) who smote him with a cane. He also lost his eye-sight. The engineer repented for the grievous sin and rearranged the railway map. He regained his eyesight. As a token of gratitude he gifted a horse vahana to the temple. He also arranged to relay the floor of the main shrines.

NANJUNDESWARA TEMPLE

The temple dedicated to Nanjundeswara is located adjacent to the Ranganatha temple. The Presiding Deity known as Nanjundeswara gives darshan in the form of a linga. The stone found beneath the Avudayar is of light red colour. The sanctum is believed to have been fashioned out of a single block of stone. On the Northern side a separate shrine exists for the divine consort referred to as Ulagamman or Ulaganayagi.

The Vimana of the Main shrine resembles that of North Indian temples. The metal icon of Chandrasekhara found here has a peculiar feature. Normally he is represented with a crescent Moon on his forehead. Here the full figure of Ganga is engraved. Sculptures of Virabhadra, Vinayaka, Rishabhantika, Palani Andavar, Mahishasuramardini, Subramanya, Anjaneya and Nataraja adorn the walls of the sanctum. Lord Siva in the guise of a hunter and Parvathi dressed as the huntress are also portrayed. Vinayaka has one leg bent while the other one rests on the ground. Mahakali is represented in a dancing pose. Worthy specimens like that of the Machavallabha emerging out of a fish, of a soldier armed with the sword and the shield and fighting with two lions and of the goat worshipping the Lord are

exemplary. Living creatures like bandicoot, Swan, Yali, Makara Fish, Elephant, Horse, Snake, Pig, Tiger, bull and rishaba are also depicted in the form of sculptures.

Like the Meenakshi Amman temple of Madurai the garbagriha of Nanjundeswara temple has the sculptures of six huge elephants each nearly -6- feet tall. The miniature representations of Balasubramania, Rishabaruda, Kali, Brahma and Lakshmi Narayana are accommodated on both sides of the elephants.

The remnants of a fort constructed by Tipu Sultan are believed to exist near Karamadai. A copper plate grant obtained from Mr. Rama Sastri and Mr. Mahadeva Sastri of Karamadai refers to the grant of a village called Poosarapallam to the Brahmins. It was engraved in the Saka year 1479. The grant was made by Iswara Devaraja Raja, the General of Krishnaraya Udayar. □



THADICOMBU

SOUNDARARAJA PERUMAL TEMPLE

Five centuries ago a man of pious disposition and profound wisdom lived in Southern India. He was named Vidyaranya. A number of legends are extant about his

relationship with God. It is said that Goddess Mahalakshmi, highly appeased with his penance showered gold. The sagacious sage realised that a Herculean task awaited him. At that time hordes of Moslem marauders had threatened to extinguish the torch of native religion and culture. Vidyanagara wanted to lay the nucleus of an Empire with the fortune that he had received. The empire would not only grant asylum to the native faith, but also stand as a bulwark against the fissiparous tendencies. Vidyanagar, the dream-city laid by the sapient saint and ruled by Harihara and Bukka later blossomed forth into the magnificent Vijayanagar Empire. Under the aegis of enlightened rulers like Krishnadevaraya, the Vijayanagar empire not only shielded Hinduism from the rapacious intruders but also revitalised it. An era of Hindu Renaissance was ushered in.

Scholars and sages well versed in Hindu religion worked hand in glove with the ruling elite to give impetus to the movement. Temples rose up in every nook and corner under the patronage of the ruling class. The rising wave of Hindu revival hit a sizeable portion of Tamilnadu which recognised the suzerainty of the Vijayanagar rulers. Among the temples constructed at the instance of the Vijayanagar rulers, the temple of Soundararaja Perumal found at Thadicombu is a remarkable specimen. This village is situated at a distance of 8 kilometres from Dindugal, the capital of the Dindugal District. It is well served by buses plying in different directions.

In olden days the place was a dense forest covered with palmyrah trees thereby earning the name Thalavana or Thalapuri (Thala : Palmyrah). A mendicant called Manduka was performing an arduous penance under a

Palmyrah tree. He was frequently harassed by Thalasura, a demon of disrepute. The rishi pleaded with Śrīmad Narayana to relieve him of his distress. Thereupon, Mahaviṣṇu appeared in the guise of Kallalagar and castigated the demon.

The sage implored the Lord to reside eternally at that place in the august company of Sridevi and to bless the devotees. This is in brief the account of the origin of the temple narrated in the local chronicle.

The region passed under the hegemony of the Vijayanagar monarchs in the fifteenth century. An exodus of Telugu speaking people to the Tamil country began. A substantial chunk of them settled down around Dindugal. Under their influence Thalapur became Thadicombu (in Telugu Thadi denotes Palmyrah and combu refers to a group).

The temple of Soundararaja Perumal occupying an area of $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres has a well-designed five-tiered gopuram at the eastern entrance. The temple is encompassed by massive walls on all the sides. On all the four sides streets have been laid to facilitate the movement of the ratha during the festival. The temple comprises of one outer Prakara and five shrines. Soundararaja Perumal, The Presiding Deity gives darshan in a standing pose. Sridevi and Bhudevi occupy their respective places on either side. He bears the divine weapons like Panchajanya, Sudarshana and Gomēdak in his arms. The deity raises to a height of five feet. The small made but enchanting Utsavar also presents Himself in an identical fashion. A small Peeta nearby was allotted by Soundararaja to Chakrathalwar. In a sublime sanctum located to the south of the Main

Shrine, Goddess Soundaravalli Thayar offers her blessings. Andal, Garuda, Venugopala, Anjaneya, Vishwakshena and Lakshmi Narasimha have also been accommodated in different shrines. The shrine of Sudarshana located at the south west corner is so spacious that it could as well be considered an independent temple. Vignesvara, Bhairava, Kshetrapala and Vishvaleeswara have also found a place in the temple. The metallic images of the twelve Alwars found in the temple are a feast to the aesthetist.

The Anna Mantap, otherwise known as the Unjal Mantap and the Sundara Pandya Mantap also called the Kalyan Mantap, adjoining the shrine of the Thayar are veritable treasure-houses of sculptures. The sculptural representations of the Dasavatars of Mahavishnu are splendid. The images of Sanganidhi and Padumanidhi occupying a pillar are rare specimens. A number of male figures are sculptured alongwith their wives. They probably represent the scions of the Vijayanagar dynasty who constructed parts of the temple. The formation of Kodungais of this mantap are exemplary. The same mantap houses two pillars which emit musical notes when struck, reminiscent of similar pieces found in the temples of Madurai, Suchindram, Tenkasi, Krishnapuram and Alwar Tirunagari. The gigantic figure of the standing Ganesa holding Angusa in his hands, of Vishnu Durga containing exceptional features and of Anjaneya occupying the pillars of this mantap are also noteworthy.

The pillars of the Sundara Pandya Mantap carry fourteen exquisite life-size images of marvellous workmanship. A brief description of the artistic merits of these sculptures is attempted here.

VAIKUNTANATHA: This sculpture is supposed to depict Vasudeva. Vishnu is seated upon Adishesha, whose body is coiled in three turns, with the right leg hanging down and the left leg folded and made to rest upon the serpent. In the back right and the left hands he clasps the Chakra and the Sankha while in the front right and the left hands he grips the gada and the padma. Garuda with his hands folded in an anjali pose presents himself just below his seat and slightly on the left side.

STHAUNA NARASIMHA: Sculptures of Sthauna Narasimha are found in two forms. The first one depicts Narasimha's fight with Hiranyakasipu; the second one picturises Hiranyakasamhara. In the first one Narasimha is shown as advancing towards Hiranyaka from the right while the Asura raises his sword with a view to strike the adversary. The Asura's face reveals his defiant mood. Narasimha grips the body of the antagonist in his bid to overawe him. He holds one of the right hands high as though he would deal a blow upon the Asura with the open palm of that hand. One of his arms reveals the abhaya pose while the other hands clutch weapons like Sankha, Chakra, Khadga and Khetaka. The conventional depiction of the lion's face, the conical krita placed upon his hand, the expressionless face and the straight mechanically arranged mane point out the fact that the figure belongs to a much later school of sculpture. In the second sculpture Narasimha has overpowered the contumacious for and has thrown him on his lap as a prelude to ripping open his belly.

MAHAVISHNU : This form represents Varadaraja. The Lord rides on the shoulders of Garuda who is seated in the alidhasana pose. Garuda holds the feet of Mahavishnu in his hands. In his eight arms Vishnu has objects like Chakra, Sankha, Gada, Khadga, Khetaka, Dhanus, Bana and Padma. Normally this form symbolises the saviour of Gajendra, the divine elephant from the clutches of the crocodile. The elephant and the crocodile are however conspicuous by their absence in this sculpture.

SUDARSHANA OR CHAKRATHALWAR : The gigantic and the awe striking sculpture of Sudarshana has hair that stands out in 20 plaits or jatas and glows with the radiance of fire. He could strike terror into the hearts of the viewer with his terrific look. His 16 arms possess objects like Chakra, Sankha, Dhanus, Parasu, Sword (called asi), Bana, Sula, Pasa, Ankusa, Agni, Khadga, Khetaga, Hala, musala, Gada and Kunta.

MADANAGOPALA : The figure of Madanagopala who held even the cattle spell bound with his divine flute is a lovely piece of art. He possesses eight arms; the three right hands hold Padma, Parasu and Chakra while the corresponding left hands grip the Sankha, Pasa and a bow made of sugar cane. With the two remaining hands the flute is held as if he is playing upon it. Madanagopala stands with the left leg resting on the floor; the right leg is thrown across behind so as to touch the ground with the toes.

MANMATHA AND RATHI : The Guardian angels of the worldly pleasures are gracefully represented in two pillars in such a way that they face each other. A bow of sugarcane and arrows made of flowers grace the hands of Manmatha. Rathi has a flower and a fruit in her hands.

TRIVIKRAMA : Mahavishnu appearing in disguise as a Liliputian-like mendicant obtained as a gift the land that could be measured by three strides of his tiny feet from Mahabali. Immediately he transfigured himself into the mammoth Trivikrama and measured the Heaven and the Earth in two strides. This huge frame of Mahavishnu has found a place in one of the pillars.

NATARAJA AND KALI : A sense of haughtiness overcame Goddess Kali. She challenged Lord Shiva to outsmart her in the art of dancing. Lord Shiva picked up the gauntlet and matched wits with her in the form of Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer. By performing a feat which Kali could not repeat he emerged victorious in the contest. The charming representations of the two dancers are found in the pillars.

AGORA VEERABHADRA : Veerabhadra was sent on a special mission to reprimand the vain Daksha who audaciously performed a penance without inviting Lord Shiva. Having accomplished his task, Veerabhadra gave a fiery appearance. This form of Agora Veerabhadra is also sculptured in another pillar.

RAMA : Rama is depicted as resting upon the shoulders of the faithful Anjaneya.

KARTHAVEERYARJUNA : Karthaveeryarjuna whose arms possessed the might of one thousand hands overwhelmed even the invincible Ravana. However he met his end at the hands of Parasurama. A sculpture of this redoubtable warrior king adorns a pillar.

In addition to these sculptures the figures of yali gracing a few pillars are products of excellent workmanship. These sculptures have acquired enormous reputation. In fact the temple owes its name and fame

to the sculptures that adorn the pillars of the Sundara Pandya mantap. They are excellent specimens testifying to the glory of the Nayak style of architecture. It is to be borne in mind that similar sculptures can be seen at the Kailasanatha temple of Taramangalam, Pattiswara temple of Perur, Venkatesa temple of Krishnapuram and Kasi Vishwanatha temple of Tenkasi.

A few more sculptures, found in other parts of the temple, are also worthy of mention. A few colourful stucco images adorn the outer mantap of the shrine of Vishwaksena. Sculptures of four maidens are discernible near the first entrance. The drapery and ornaments that grace their persons are exquisitely engraved. It is opined that the polished pillars and the glamorous mantaps of this temple were shaped after identical structures found at Hampi, the capital of the Vijayanagar empire. It is said that no sculptor could produce replicas of the sculptures found at Taramangalam and Thadicombu in stone.

Although no drainage facilities are available inside the temple, the water that is poured on the floor disappears in no time. No explanation has been given for this occurrence. It has remained an unsolved conundrum so far.

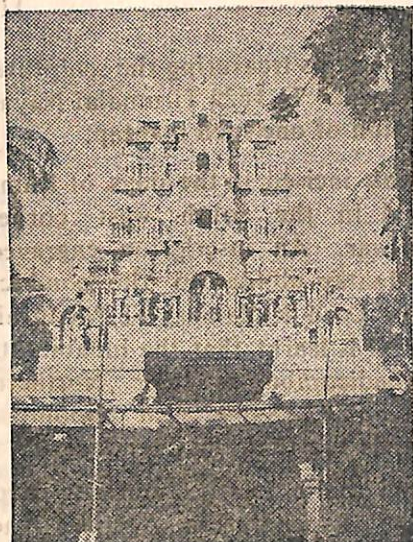
From the fifteenth century onwards Dindugal was a bone of contention among various political forces culminating in protracted warfare. Wars badly affected the social life of the people. People moved in large numbers to Thadicombu, which developed into a busy town. Under the British rule it was the capital of the division till 1801. The construction of the temple commenced in the days of Rama Raya, the ruler of Vijayanagar and was consummated by his successor

Achuta Raya. The outer mantaps treasuring the sculptures arose in the days of the Nayaks. In 1629 Tirumalai Nayak arranged for the construction of one such mantap.

A mutilated inscription incised in the days of Rama Raya (1620-50) is found in the south west corner of the shrine of Garudalwar. An inscription engraved in the Sundara Pandya Mantap alludes to the conduct of the marriage festival of Lord Kallalagar of Madurai. From another inscription it is learnt that the inhabitants of Madurai regarded Thadicombu as their Northern settlement. A chieftain named Sundaesan appointed archakas and assigned lands for their maintenance.

Poojas are performed both in the morning and evening, adhering to the Pancharathra Agama. The Brahmotsavam conducted in the month of Adi (July-August) is a grand affair. During one of these days the car festival takes place. Vasanthotsavam, conducted on the occasion of Chithra Pournami is also well organised. During this festival the Utsavar mounts the horse vahana and has a dip in the Kumba river after which he is taken in a procession to Dindugal where he sojourns for three days. A close link exists between the Soundararaja Perumal Temple and the Alagar temple of Madurai. The festivals are conducted simultaneously in both these temples. Vahanas like horse, elephant, Garuda, Swan and Sesha all made of wood are in usable condition. The temple owns some ornaments and some tracts of land. Marriages are performed occasionally in the temple.

The Soundararaja Perumal Temple of Thadicombu is one of the rare treasure-houses of art bequeathed by our ancestors. □



TIRUMOHUR

KALAMEGHA

PERUMAL

TEMPLE

The sleepy hamlet of Tirumohur, a place steeped in hoary tradition, lies at a distance of about 15 kilometres from Madurai. A host of literary works, written in the past, refer to the place as a very prosperous town which throbbed with life. The place is mentioned in the world map drawn by Ptolemy, the Greek astronomer. The poems of the Sangam Age, some of which were composed even before the advent of the Christian era, contain ample references to Tirumohur. It is one of the eighteen sacred Vaishnava pilgrim centres of Pandinad (the region encompassing the modern Madurai, Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli districts of Tamil Nadu) which have found a place in the sacred hymns of the Alwars. The place could be reached by buses that ply between Madurai and Thiruvadavur.

Lord Vishnu took various incarnations to root out evil and to restore peace in the world. He transformde

Himself into Mohini, the maiden of bewitching charm on at least four occasions. The vile and the headstrong sages of Dharuka forest had the audacity to disregard the worship of God. In order to teach a lesson to the wayward sages, Lord Siva lured their consorts by appearing in the form of the enchanting Bhikshadanar. Simultaneously, Vishnu took the form of the bewitching Mohini to enamour the rishis. On another occasion, when Vishnu embarked upon the form of Mohini, Hariharaputra or Ayyapa was born.

Siva, appeased by the penance performed by Bhasmasura, granted him a boon by which he could set on fire any object touched by him. Overwhelmed with delight, the Asura decided to test the efficacy of the boon by touching the head of Siva himself. Siva was saved by Vishnu, who appeared in the form of Mohini. The astounding charm of the maiden cast a spell upon the Asura, who fell head over heels in love with her. While dancing to her tunes, Bhasmasura inadvertantly placed his hands upon his own head and was reduced to ashes.

The Devas and the Asuras were about to wage a war for taking possession of the holy nectar that arose when they churned the Ocean of Milk. The ambrosia was purported to confer immortality upon the person who consumed it. Vishnu appeared in the form of the charming Mohini, bedecked with attractive costumes. She offered to distribute the nectar equally to both the Devas and the Asuras. By her wiles and guiles she foxed the Asuras till the nectar was emptied by the Devas. Thus the benefit of immortality was conferred upon the Devas. This episode took place at Tirumohur.

A lofty and magnificent rajagopuram standing at the eastern gateway of the temple greets the visitor. It leads to a huge mantapam supported by massive pillars. The colossal figures of the two Marudu Pandiya brothers who were instrumental in the construction of a considerable part of the temple, adorn one of the pillars. A three-tiered smaller tower leads to the Garuda Mantapam, the pillars of which are embellished by the figures of the characters found in the epics and the puranas. The sublime beauty and the intricate delicacy of the figures draw the attention of even the casual visitor. In one pillar, the charming Manmatha appears, holding the bow and the arrow; the serene countenance of Lakshmana and the ever humble Anjaneya, with his diadems trembling in reverence to his master, are intricately portrayed in another pillar. The beautiful sculpture of Rama and his consort Sita depicted in a graceful posture, occupies another pillar.

In the sanctum, Lord Kalamegha, accompanied by Sridevi and Bhudevi gives darshan to the devotees, in a standing pose. A unique feature at this place is that both Sridevi and Bhudevi do not touch the feet of the Lord. The imposing figure of the Lord, bedecked with opulent costumes and extravagant ornaments cannot but make the devotees bow in reverence and humility. The exquisite beauty of the festival idol known as 'Divine Aptham' could make it the cynosure of all eyes. A separate sanctum accommodates the 'Anantasayi Vishnu', while the ever obedient Garuda is housed in a small shrine. Seated in yet another sanctum, the divine consort known as 'Mohanavalli' or 'Tirumohurvalli' offers her blessings to the devotees.

Adjoining the sanctum of the divine consort appears the shrine of Sudarshan, the divine Disc. The worship of Chakra was first propounded by Siva. In order to absolve himself of the sin of plucking out one of the heads of Brahma, Śiva offered this form of worship. His example was meticulously followed by the Devas who used to worship the Chakra in times of trials and tribulations.

The Sthalapurānam says that Lord Vishnu blessed all the Devas at Tirumohur. The sacred tree at this place is the 'Vilva'. The lovely Vimana, raised over the sanctum of Kalamegha goes by the name 'Kedaki'. The presence of two tanks known as 'Thala Thamarai' and the 'Periya Tiruparkadal', which serve as holy theerthams add grace and grandeur to the temple. A number of inscriptions enshrined on the walls of the temple and belonging to the Nayak period, have been copied and published. Frequent renovations conducted over the years have obliterated the traces of antiquity. Various parts of the temple were renovated with the help of the Nagarattar. Kumbhabhishekams were performed in 1934 and in 1979.

Pujas are performed six times a day under the aegis of the Vaishnavite priests. According to the census taken in 1961, the temple owns about 45 acres of cultivable land. Besides, it has a car, a palanquin and various Vahanas, all made of wood. Among the various festivals celebrated here, mention must be made of Visagam (celebrated in Jan/Feb), Sri Jayanthi (July/Aug), Vaikunta Ekadasi (Dec.), Gajendra Moksham (Feb.) and Panguni Uttiram (March/April). Devotees throng the temple during those festivals, when the 'Utsava murti' is taken

around the temple in vahanas and in palanquin amidst pageantry.

When Buddhism and Jainism threatened to make considerable inroads into the established religion, the Alvars sought to spread the gospel of Vishnu among the masses. Nammalwar and Tirumangai Alwar have composed several hymns in praise of Kalamegha. Nammalwar's Tiruvoymoli refers to the fertility of the place. "The village is situated amidst lush green fields, lily ponds and graceful pastures. The endless recitation of Vedic hymns rent the air. A devotee seeking asylum in the lotus feet of Kalamegha attains bliss," 'Tirumangai Alwar's Tirumadal extols the deeds of 'the Lord of Tirumohur'. Manavala Munigal, poet Kalamegam, Tiruninravur Tirumalai and Pillai Perumal Iyenger have also composed poems on the Lord of Tirumohur. Among the eighteen Puranas, the Brahmanda Purana and the Matsya Puranas contain specific references to Tirumohur.

Tirumohur was an impregnable fortress in the 18th century, when the place was under the rule of the Nayaks of Madura. During the Carnatic wars, a Moslem General, attempted to attack the temple, but the attack was repulsed by the local devotees. □



MADURAI

KOODAL ALAGAR TEMPLE

Madurai, the erstwhile capital of the Pandyan rulers was also the seat of Tamil learning and culture. Popularly known as the 'Temple City', it possesses the magnificent Saivite temple dedicated to Lord Sundareswarar and Goddess Meenakshi. Koodal Alagar Temple,

resplendent with hoary tradition is also found in this great pilgrim centre. This Vaishnavite temple, although less stupendous in proportions, has a rich cultural legacy. It is located at a short distance from the central bus stand.

An altruistic ruler named Vallabhadeva was at the helm of affairs in the Pandya kingdom. Like all monarchs of the bye-gone days, he used to go on night patrol incognito to find out the weals and the woes of the people. On one such occasion he came across an elderly peregrinator. In the course of the discussions the King desired to know the ultimate goal of life. "Collect the provisions needed for winter well in advance; provide for the old age even when you are young; acquire for your next existence now itself" These were the wise counsel contained in the sloka called "Varshartham" recited by the sapient saint.

A couple of days later Vallabhadeva was engulfed in deliberations on the same subject with Selvanambi, the Royal Preceptor. It was decided to leave the question to the Intelligentsia. Vallabhadeva ordained that any scholar who showed him the true path to salvation would be honoured with a bag of gold coins. At that time Vishnuchita, a devotee of Vadabhadrasayee, the Presiding Deity of Srivilliputhur, was serving the Lord with flower garlands everyday. One night Mahavishnu, appearing in his dream bade him to travel to Madurai and establish His supremacy. Accordingly Vishnuchita went to the "Vyidvat Sadas" (council of pandits). By the miraculous grace of the Almighty, he expounded thathuvam, Hitham and Purushartham from out of the entire Vedas and

proclaimed the Omnipotence of Sriman Narayanan who alone could grant salvation to the stirring souls. A bag of gold coins, tied to a long pole fell at his lap on its own accord. The exultant ruler conferred the sobriquet "Battarpiran" on Vishnuchita. He also took him in a procession on an elephant with all paraphernalia. While on the procession, Vishnuchita had a vision of Mahavishnu, seated on the celestial vehicle Garuda. He was overwhelmed with the infinite brilliance and the beauty of the Lord's person and burst forth in an ecstatic prayer that this beauty should be preserved for ever.

"Reverence, reverence be unto thee, O thou Mighty One who didst overcome the Mallas, thou like to the Sapphire in glory!"

"Infinitely blessed be the beauty of Thy Holy Feet for many years, for thousands of years, for crores of years, for ever" (translation by J.S.M. Hooper). These twelve songs known as "Tiru Pallandu" (blessed many years) have acquired an universal appeal. In them Vishnuchita lavishes encomiums upon Mahavishnu, His devotees, His weapons and Mahalakshmi. The poet prays that the bewitching grace and the unparalleled charm of the Lord should remain safe for the years to come and requests all the devotees to join him in the prayer.

Vishnuchita is popularly known as Perialwar, the name indicative of his zealous and steadfast dedication to Mahavishnu. The Guruparambarai Vaibhava, the authentic history of the devotees of Mahavishnu regards his life history as Perialwar Vaibhavam. His songs are

regarded as Perialwar Tirumozhi and form a part of Nalayira Divya Prabhanda (the compilation of the songs of the twelve Alwars or Apostles of Mahavishnu). Tirupallandu is recited in all the Vaishnav shrines and even in the abodes of the Vaishnavites during certain ceremonies. Manavala Munigal decreed that recitation of Tirupallandu should precede and succeed the chanting of the Divyaprabhanda on all auspicious occasions. Ramanujacharya held Koodal Alagar Temple in reverence as the birth place of Tirupallandu. Thus the Koodal Alagar Temple has found an immortal place in Vaishnavite tradition.

It is believed that the chapter on Madurai Mahatmeeyam embodied in the Brahmanda Purana glorifies Koodal Alagar Temple. This portion has been rendered in Tamil by an anonymous poet. This work known as "Koodal Puranam" betokens to the erudition and zestfulness of the author.

On the verge of the Mahapralaya Madurai was the target of torrential rain accompanied by gusty winds which threatened to obliterate the traces of habitation. The tormented citizens implored Mahavishnu to extricate them. Mahavishnu, who as Lord Krishna had shielded the inhabitants of Ayarpadi by holding Mount Govardhana as an umbrella now directed four mammoth clouds to form a protective barrier over the city. The clouds stood as a bulwark against the impending rain and saved the city. The city acquired the name 'Nanmadakoodal' and 'Koodal Nagar'.

Vaigai river which fertilises the city has received bounteous praise in Tamil literary works. The Koodal

Purana traces its origin to the Trivikrama Avatar of Mahavishnu. When the raised foot of the Lord measured the Heaven in one gigantic stride, it touched Satyalokha, the abode of Brahma who was pleased to perform the ablution ceremony. The water used in this ceremony found its way to Madurai and took the form of river Vaigai. A tributary of it went round the city as though offering a garland to the Presiding Deity. This rivulet was known as Krithamala. On the banks of this river a large number of banana trees sprang up. The place became Kadhali Vana (a forest full of banana trees)

Satyavrata, the ruler of Madurai was a conscientious devotee of Mahavishnu. Once he was involved in worship on the fertile banks of the river Krithamala. Mahavishnu emerged in the form of Matsya and inculcated the knowledge of the Vedas. He also issued guidelines for his dynasty. As a corollary to this incident, the Pandyas adopted fish as their royal emblem.

The Sthala was a rendezvous of the pious in all the four yugas. In the Krithayuga, Sanathkumara, the mind-begotten son of Brahma yearned to worship the idol of Mahavishnu after consecrating Him at a hallowed place. He ordained Vishwakarma to construct a charming temple at Madurai. In obedience Vishwakarma formed a lovely temple where Mahavishnu took up his residence in the august company of his Parivaras. Later on he witnessed the marriage of Siva and Parvathy and blessed the couple. The Saptharishis accompanied Mahavishnu during this event.

In the Thretha Yuga, the enlightened Bridhu Chakravarthy was travelling in his divine Vimana enjoying the sylvan surroundings of Madurai. The shadow of his Vimana fell upon the temple, after which the Vimana refused to move. The nonplussed ruler visited the temple and developed a great fascination for it. He arranged for the renovation of the interior of the temple. Mahavishnu, appreciating his steadfast devotion granted him salvation.

In the Dwapara Yuga, Ambarisha Chakravarthy performed a bath at Krithamala river and offered his obeisance to the Lord of Koodal Nagar. The Lord extirpated the vile demon Kalanemi and guarded the righteous. The temple was the meeting point of numerous sages and pious rulers in the Kaliyuga. Bhrigu rishi and Urvasi, the celestial dancer were absolved of their sins. The temple was renovated on a grand scale by the mighty ruler Pururavas and his heir Indrathyumna. Such is the account of the sacrosanct spot narrated in the Koodal Purana.

Occupying an area of two acres, the Koodal Alagar temple with its lofty compound walls presents a glorious sight. The eastern entrance is graced by a five tiered gopuram raising to a height of 125 feet and embellished by elegant stucco images of the celestials. The main shrine is reached by ascending a flight of steps. Koodal Alagar, the Presiding Deity blesses the devotees in a sitting pose accompanied by Sridevi and Bhudevi. The six-foot tall deity presents a comely and an imposing appearance, fully befitting the name of Alagar (a paragon of beauty). In fact three deities bearing the title of Alagar are found in and around Madurai :—Koodal Alagar of Madurai,

Kallalagar of Alagar Koil and Kattalagar near Srivilliputhur. Koodal Alagar is also known by other names as Vaikuntanatha and Ahuyavarada (one who welcomes the devotees with his left hand and who blesses them with his right hand). The Utsavar Vyuga Sundararajar is represented by a four feet tall Panchaloka idol of resplendent grace.

To the south of the main shrine Mathuravalli Thayar graces yet another elaborate shrine which is under renovation now. She is also referred to as Vagulavalli, Maragathavalli and Varagunavalli. She attracts the womenfolk who throng the shrine on Fridays and on other auspicious occasions to obtain her benefactions. On Fridays the festival idol of the Nachiar is taken in a graceful procession.

In front of the Main Deity, Lakshmi Narasimha, Rama, Lakshmi Narayana and Krishna have been accommodated in smaller shrines. In the Northern Prakara Andal, Narasimha and Manavala Munigal have found separate shrines. The shrine of Andal has lovely paintings of Puranic scenes and inscriptions of devotional literature. Garudalwar, Anjaneya, Ramanuja, Vedanta Desikar and the Alvars have also found suitable places. The pillars of the mantaps are embellished by small sculptures of celestials.

The presence of the Navagrahas is a unique feature in this temple. Normally they are associated with Saivite temples. The existence of the Navagrahas bears ample testimony to the Saivite-Vaishnavite harmony that was prevalent here.

The scintillating Ashtanga Vimana situated over the sanctum of the Main Deity is another rare

phenomenon discernible in this temple. Silpa Sastras refer to 96 types of Vimanas that grace the Vaishnavite temples. Among them Ashtanga Vimana stands unparalleled in beauty and grandeur. It represents the Ashtakshara mantra of Mahavishnu - "Om Namō Narayana". It consists of eight parts - Adhisthana, Pada, Pada, Pada. Prasthana, Griva, Sikhara and Stupi. Circumambulation of the Vimana is believed to confer the effects of chanting the Ashtakshara mantra. Devotees overcome by distress used to circumambulate the Vimana for -45- days and attain fulfilment of their desires. While describing the Vimana, Fergusson states that the dome of this temple surpasses anything of its kind found in South India.

Ascending a flight of steps found in the Maha Mantap one can have a darshan of the Vimana. The second floor has a shrine dedicated to Suryanarayana who presents Himself in a standing pose alongwith His Devis. The paintings of the Ashtadikpalakas grace the inner walls of this sanctum. In the last floor Mahavishnu gives darshan in a lying pose as Kshirapatinatha. The stucco images of the dasavataras of Mahavishnu are found here.

The Stupi or the finial glitters with its golden colour and is surrounded by four smaller ones. The four corners of the Vimana are graced by 4 rishis while the sixteen corners of the lower portions are occupied by 16 sages. The images of Bhuvaraga, Lakshmi Narasimha, Lakshmi Narayana and Narayanamoorthy occupy a significant portion of the Vimana. The episodes pertaining to Ramayana and Srimad Bhagavata are also sculptured in the Vimana.

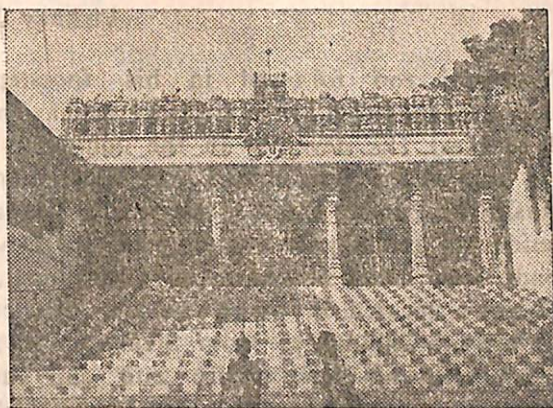
Comparing the architectural features of the Koodal Alagar Temple with that of the Meenakshi Amman Temple, J. R. M. Shetty, the author of "Madurai, the Temple City" states, "Here the structure is strictly confined to the barest essentials of temple worship. Simplicity is the keynote of the style. The elaborate mantaps, 1000 pillared halls, cloisters, pavilions and corridors are absent. The central structure has a perfect pyramid and has a circular cupola at its apex, ending in a pointed golden spear-head".

The Ashtanga Vimana was believed to be the handiwork of Viswakarma, the divine architect. No doubt a multitude of celestials have all been accommodated in the Vimana. A noteworthy feature of this Vimana is that its shadow does not fall on the ground. Specimens of Ashtanga Vimana are found only at three other places: Uttiramerur, Tirukoshtiyur and Chermadevi. Inscriptions refer to the Presiding Deity as 'Koodal Alagiya Perumal'. Gifts of land, gold, houses and villages were donated for the performance of the daily rituals. Another inscription alludes to the donation of granite stones for the construction of the Ardha Mantap of the temple. The temple which had its origin in the VIII century A.D., was elaborated with mantaps by the Nayaks of Madura. In their days, the Dwajastamba mantap and the mantap found in front of the Hema Pushkarni were constructed. The temple was renovated under the auspices of Mr. Alagappa Chettiar who performed the Kumbhabhisheka in 1923. Twenty years later the Obulas carried out certain improvements. Munificent endowments were made by eminent philanthropists a few decades later. The Mahakumbhabhisheka was performed on 4-4-76 after elaborate

renovations. Extensive renovations are being carried out now.

Poojas are performed six times a day adhering punctiliously to the canons laid down in the Vaikanasa Agamas. The principles of the Tenkalai sect are followed here. The temple owns about 23 acres of cultivable land and a few buildings which fetch a decent rent. The temple possesses valuable ornaments of which the Thirumangalyam of the Thayar, inlaid with precious stones deserves special mention. In addition, Vahanas valued at Rs. 10000 and investments worth Rs 50000 are also held in the name of the temple. The Brahmotsavam conducted in Vaikasi and the Margazhi festival are well attended. During the Margazhi festival Koodal Alagar is taken to a place called Menkattu Pottal where he blesses Perialwar who appears on a well-caparisoned elephant. Swathi festival (July-August), Andal Utsavam, Garudaseva, Navarathri, Vaikunta Ekadasi, Parivettai, Teppotsavam (December-January), and Tirukalyanam (March-April) are also celebrated with gaiety.

Koodal Alagar Temple has been sanctified by literature. Historians are of the opinion that literary works of the Sangam Age contain references to this sacred place. Mangudi Marudan's Madurai Kanchi seems to picturise the Tiruvonam festival that was conducted here. Paripadal, Kalithogai and Silappadikaram also allude to this hallowed spot. Perialwar, Thirumangai Alwar and Tirumazhisai Alwar have also lavished praise upon the Lord of Madurai. Divya Kavi Pillai Perumal Aiyangar's 108 Tirupathi Anthathi, Koodal Sthalapuram and a few later works have also referred to the bounteous nature of Koodal Alagar. □



TIRUTHANGAL

NINRA NARAYANA PERUMAL TEMPLE

A grave doubt haunted the minds of the three Devis-Sridevi, Bhudevi and Neeladevi who are accorded a honourable place near Mahavishnu. The doubt gave rise to the question of supremacy among the three, each staking her claims for preponderance. Determined to prove her eminence, Sridevi repaired to a sequestered spot which was sorrounded by fertile pastures and sought solace in meditation. Devotees and sages flocked to the place to have a darshan of the Goddess of wealth and to receive her benefactions. In response to their entreaties, she condescended to reside eternally at that spot under the name 'Arunakamalamahadevi'. Realising that living in solitude would be improper, she engendered a theertha and propitiated Mahavishnu. The lord who was highly appeased by her earnestness consented to reside eternally at that spot. Bhudevi

and Neeladevi too followed in his footsteps and effected a reconciliation with Sridevi. Mahavishnu had desired to bless His devotees in the company of His Devis at this spot. This drama was enacted only to accomplish His object. The place where Mahavishnu thus resides in the august company of Sri Devi, Bhudevi and Neela Devi is known as Tiruthangal. It is a small town located in the Kamarajar district, at a distance of two kilometres from Sivakasi. It is ably served by frequent bus service and can easily be reached from important towns like Madurai, Srivilliputhur, Sankarankoil, Virudhunagar and Sivakasi.

A hillock, 100 feet tall and located at the northern part of the town accommodates the temple which faces South. Numerous Kodungais, adorned by graceful stucco images lend grandeur to the entrance. Climbing a flight of steps one reaches the spacious Kalyana Mantap constructed under the aegis of a devotee named Narayana Ramanuja of Senkamala Nachiarpuram. A substantial portion of his earnings from Burma, augmented by donations from the public contributed to this cause. Fittingly, the sculpture of this philanthropist graces a pillar of the mantap.

A cave temple bearing traces of the Pandyan art is found to the West of the Kalyana Mantap. The stupendous image of Pallikonda Perumal (Mahavishnu in His reclining pose) is housed in this cave. Sridevi and Bhudevi serve at His feet while sages Markandeya and Bhrigu occupy a prominent place on either side. An interesting anecdote explains the cause of His presence in this sacred place. Lord Ranganatha of Srirangam was enamoured of Andal's pulchritude. He embarked upon a

journey to Srivilliputhur to seek her hand in marriage. As it became dark, He sojourned at Tiruthangal for a night. In commemoration of this incident the place was named Tiruthangal (Thangal-staying) while the hillock received the nomenclature Thangalgiri. The pillars of the cave bear the sculptures of Puroora Chakravarthy and Alagiri Konar.

The second tier of the temple complex accommodates the four-pillared mantap, Vahana Mantap, Mirror room and the Madapalli. In a separate sanctum, the Thayar known as Arunakamala Mahadevi or Senkamalavalli offers darshan in an east-facing pose. One of her hands offers the Abhaya mudra while the other hangs down. She is normally anointed with oil. Contrary to the usual customs, she is represented in a standing pose. She is the recipient of the poojas first; Only after offering her poojas, the Bhattars begin worship at the Main Shrine. Devotees offer cotton sarees (nine yards in length) to her for fulfilment of their vows. Unmarried girls, barren women and devotees seeking various fortunes propitiate this boon-giver with utmost sincerity. Separate sanctums located nearby house the images of Tirumangai Alwar, Ramanujar and Manavala Munigal. A wooden shed constructed under the auspices of Ramanujadasa is embellished by colourful paintings and sculptures.

The flight of stairs located near the Dwajasthamba leads the visitor to the third phase of the temple where the Mahamantapa and the Main sanctum sanctorum are located. The unusual spectacle of Garuda grasping the Amruta Kalasa in his right hand and the serpent in his left hand greets the visitor. He holds the other two hands in a supplicating pose. The Ardha Mantap is guarded

by dwarapalakas of gigantic stature and awesome features. These images were created at the instance of the ruling dynasty of Sattur Kolarapatti.

The Alwars and the Acharyas are also housed in appropriate places. The Presiding Deity Ninra Narayana Perumal as the name suggests presents Himself in a standing posture and faces east. The sanctum is garnished by no less than eleven images, all of them colossal in stature and colourful in appearance. On the extreme right is seen Markandeya in a humble pose with his hands folded. By his side are represented Garuda, Aruna, Viswakarma. Bhudevi and Sridevi all in a standing pose. In the middle appears Appan with one hand pointing his feet while the other is placed upon the hip. Next to Him are accommodated Neeladevi (Jambavathi), Usha, Aniruddha and Bhrigu who is positioned at the extreme left. The Utsavar known as Tiruthangal Appan is placed in front of these images. These eleven images are made of stucco and are gorgeously decorated. The colourful and gracious looking Vimana, known as Somachandra Vimana, bears a close resemblance to the vimanas found at Srirangam and Alagarkoil in appearance. Images of Nardanakrishna, Andal, Durga and Vinayaka can be seen as one circumambulates the inner prakara.

The eighth chapter of Kshetra Kanda contained in the Brahmanda Purana has given a pen picture of this hallowed place. Puroora Chakravarthy, a prudent and uprighteous ruler of Bharathavarsha renounced his kingdom in favour of his sons with the avowed intention of seeking eternal bliss. He sought guidance from the sages to the appropriate place for performing a penance. The sapient sages rightly directed him to Tiruthangal

where he conducted an austere penance. He was rewarded with a darshan of Mahavishnu who duly granted him salvation.

Devendra Vallabha, a scion of the Pandya dynasty held sway over this part of the country. The ruler launched a hunting expedition to extirpate certain wild beasts that tormented the inhabitants. A ferocious tiger escaped his arrows. The tiger and the pursuing ruler reached Tiruthangal. Ultimately when the ruler was about to send his dart at the exhausted tiger, a celestial intervened and narrated to the non-plussed ruler the life story of the tiger. In its previous existence the tiger, was a ruler named Chandraketu. The ruler had offended the celestials by not adhering to the principles governing a Vrita. As a consequence he was reborn as a tiger.

Both Devendra Vallabha and the tiger received the grace of Mahavishnu at Tiruthangal. In commemoration of this event a small hillock named Puliparai (Tiger's rock) exists nearby. A Pandya ruler named Salyapandya was also blessed by Mahavishnu at this kshetra.

Banasura, the ruler of Mahishmathi was a zealous votary of Lord Shiva. He was endowed with the strength of one thousand arms. His daughter Usha was an ardent devotee of Parvathi. She prayed to the Goddess to grant her a suitable husband. The same night she had a dream in which she was united with a Prince of unparalleled charm. She pined for the prince who had appeared in her dream. Chitrlekha, her bosom friend showed her the portraits of all the contemporary princes who had attained the marriageable age. When Usha saw the figure of Aniruddha, the grandson of Lord Krishna, she

blushed profusely. Chitralekha by the use of her conjuratory skills transmitted, Aniruddha from his palace to Usha's abode. The amorous couple spent a few days merrily.

Banasura was infuriated by this occurrence and immured Aniruddha after a tough and prolonged duel. Lord Krishna launched a mammoth expedition to secure the release of Aniruddha. Lord Shiva with his mighty Boothagana forces took the field in response to Banasura's entreaties. It looked as though Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna were pitted in battle. It was however only an illusion created to bring Banasura to his senses and to reveal through him to the world the oneness of Shiva and Mahavishnu. Banasura lost the potent strength of his one thousand arms. He realised the folly of waging a war with the divine forces and submitted. The marriage of Usha and Aniruddha was celebrated on a grandiose scale. The Sthalapurana states that Tiruthangal was the venue of this divine marriage. Fittingly the images of Usha and Aniruddha are housed in the Main Shrine.

The hillock upon which the temple is located (known as Thangalgiri) is capable of relieving the devotees of mental weariness and physical fatigue. A debate arose between Adishesha and a sacred banyan tree located at an island known as Swetha. Brahma who was invited to pass the verdict decided in favour of Adishesha who has the rare distinction of serving Mahavishnu as His bed. Banyan tree was greatly mortified. He indulged in an austere penance near the Ocean of Milk seeking a status similar to that enjoyed by Adishesha. Acting under the Lord's behests, he

transformed himself into a hillock upon which Mahavishnu consented to reside eternally. This hillock received the name Thangalgiri. It is regarded as an embodiment of the banyan leaf upon which Mahavishnu reposed during the Mahapralaya. The kshetra itself was eulogised as Sri Kshetra & Sripuramin memory of Sridevi's penance. The kshetra belongs to a category called Arsham as it was incepted by a sage,

The sthalapurana enlists no less than 5 theerthas. The Papanasa theertha located near the temple is considered sacrosanct. It is stated that acting in consonance with the advice given by the Saptharishis, sixty one rivers fertilising various parts of our country had a confluence here. A dip in this theertha is believed to absolve the devotees of all sins. The Bhaskara theertha engendered by Surya is located at the eastern part of the town. When Surya endeavoured to rescue Vigruthi, the daughter of a rishi named Sindhu who was abducted by a peccant demon named Sandagosha, his arrow inadvertantly pierced a Brahmin. Surya was haunted by Brahmahatti (the heinous sin of killing a Brahmin). Surya was relieved of his sin when he propitiated the Lord of Tiruthangal. Arjuna theertha generated by Arjuna during his pilgrimage has taken the form of the Arjuna river. In addition Sangha theertha and Paduma theerthas are also associated with this Kshetra. The Banyan tree serves as the sthalavriksha.

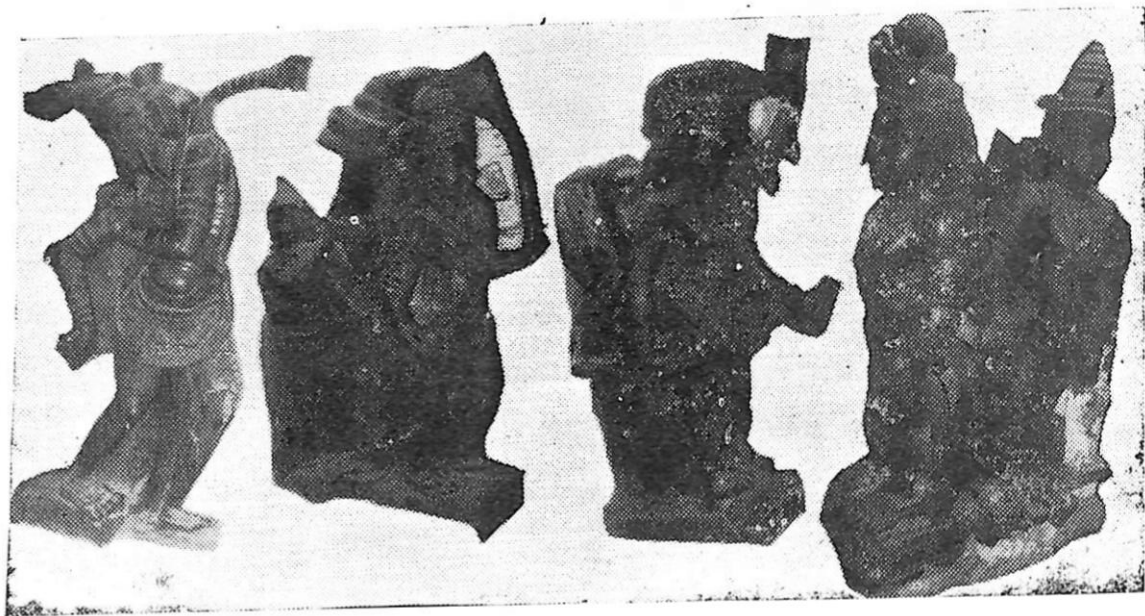
A host of inscriptions deciphered by the Government Epigraphist at the temple premises furnish precious information, An inscription dated 1032 A D. refers to the Presiding Deity as the Paramaswamy who

willingly chose the hillock as His abode. The kshetra was a devadana forming a part of Karuneelakudinadu. A lake referred to as Devendra Vallabha Pereri existed by the side of the temple. A shrine was erected for installing the image of Singhaperumal (Narasimha) in the reign of Maravarman Kalasekharapandya (XIII century). The two sons of an official named Tiruvenkatanatha constructed a Mantap in the western prakara. In 1220 A.D. the two brothers set up a mutt and granted endowments for the recitation of Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas periodically.

During the reign of Sundara Pandya special poojas were instituted in the name of the ruler. In A.D. 1227 Gurukulatharaiyan, a minister of Sundara Pandya arranged for the construction of the Sanctum, the Mahamantap and the Ardhamantap of this temple,

A noble lady named Tirumangai Andal installed the metal icons of Karmarchanai Emperuman and the Devis in the reign of Jatavarman Kulasekhara Pandya. The festival idols were taken out in an amazing procession on the New Moon Day. The inscription providing this information was recopied after which the rock containing the original epigraph was shattered to pieces.

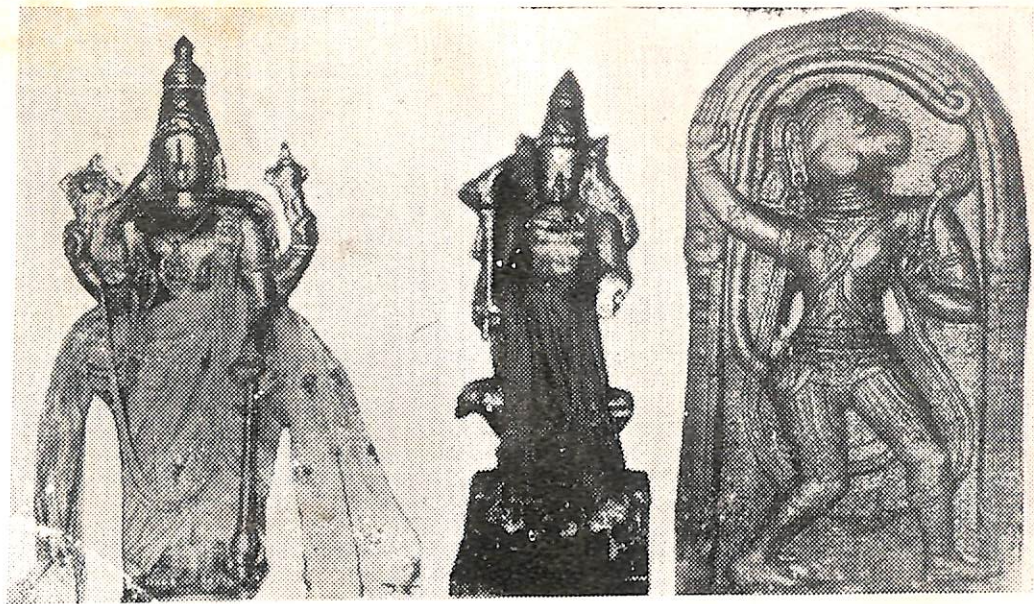
In recent times the local population has contributed to the expansion of the temple. About 60 years back two philanthropists - Ramanujadasa and Narayanadasa of Senkamalanachiarpuram arranged for the construction of the Kalyana Mantap, Garuda Mantap and other Mantaps. In 1979 the Northern compound wall, 120 feet long and 30 feet tall collapsed due to torrential



Sculptures - Krishnapuram



Sculptures - Krishnapuram



Utsavar

Saneesvara
Sri Vaikuntam

Anjaneya
Tirukoilur



Adikesava Perumal, Sridevi & Bhudevi
(Utsavar) Mylapore



Peyalwar Mylapore

The renovation committee made a marathon effort to get the compound wall repaired and to renovate the interior parts of the temple.

Poojas are organised four times a day in accordance with the injunctions laid down in the Vaikanasa Agama with the help of contributions from the local devotees. Among the festivals organised at the temple, Srijayanthi Uriyadi, Pavithrotsavam, Garudotsavam, Navarathri, Deepavali, Manavala Mamunigal day, Karthigai, Tirumangai Alwar day, Vaikunta Ekadasi and Kalyana Utsavam (held in Panguni) deserve to be mentioned. The Vaikasi Vasanthotsavam, Pillai Lokacharyar festival and Kurathalwar festivals are organised for ten days each. On the Chitra Pournami day, the festival image is sallied out at 5 a.m. to have a ceremonial dip in the Arjuna river; later he mounts a horse vahana and visits as many as ten villages situated in the neighbourhood. On the fifth day of the Adi Pooram festival, the Utsavar is concomited to Srivilliputhur for participation in the local festival.

Tiruthangal occupies a honourable place among the eighteen Divyadesas of Pandinad which have been eulogised by the Alwars. Boothathalwar has sung a solitary hymn while Tirumangai Alwar has panegyrised the Lord of Tiruthangal in four hymns. Divya Kavi Pillai Perumal Aiyangar has also dedicated a hymn to the kshetra.

KARUNELLINATHAR TEMPLE: On the other side of the hillock another rock-cut temple dedicated to Lord Shiva exists. The Presiding Deity, referred to as Karunellinathar manifests Himself in the form of a linga. His consort Meenakshi is housed in a separate sanctum. Subsidiary Deities like Vinayaka, Dakshinamurthi, Chandra and Surya are also accommodated in

the interior of the temple. The magnificent life-size stone idols of Nataraja and Sivakami, housed in the Sabai are exemplary and unique.

This temple was constructed in 1233 under the auspices of Gurukulatharaiyan, an able minister of Sundarapandya. In memory of Ulli Bomman Kalangatha Kanda Nayakar who had attained martyrdom at this place Tiruthangal and the surrounding areas were gifted to his family. A sculpture of this martyr has found a place on the pillar of this temple. In this temple poojas are conducted four times a day.

Ascending a flight of steps located near the entrance one reaches the shrine of Palaniandavar which owes its origin to an ardent devotee named Arumugha Tambiran. The aged Bhakta used to travel upto Palani on foot carrying a kavadi and accompanied by his daughter and return to Tiruthangal on the same day. As years rolled on he found the task daunting. He expressed his inability to walk the whole distance to the Lord. Acting under the injunctions of the Lord, he trekked a short distance. While he was cooking his food, Lord Subramania showered golden coins in front. Arumugha Tambiran utilised this largesse to construct a shrine for Palani Andavar at Tiruthangal itself. The place where Arumugha Tambiran breathed his last is marked by a mutt, where the articles used by the devotee are still kept in safe custody. Special poojas are conducted here on the Thai Poosam day and food is distributed to the destitute persons.

SILAPPADIKARAM: The antiquity of Tiruthangal is borne out by a reference to the place found in Silappadikaram, the Tamil epic assigned to the second century A.D. Parasara, a Brahmin pandit hailing from Poompuhar, the Chola metropolis

journeyed to the capital of the Chera monarch, renowned for heaping gifts upon the deserving poor. Parasara by the suitable use of his skills gratified the Chera ruler and obtained considerable gifts as a reward. While returning from the Chera country, he sojourned at Tiruthangal where Brahmins endowed with profound wisdom resided. While relaxing beneath a huge tree Parasara sighted Brahmin youths who indulged in playful jests. He offered adequate reward to the youth who would repeat the Vedic hymns recited by him. Dakshinamurthy, the son of a noble brahmin named Vartihan enthralled Parasara by repeating the Vedic hymns perfectly. Parasara was too pleased with the youth's performance that he presented costly gifts to him. The neighbours of Vartihan grew envious of his fortunes. They complained to the Pandya ruler Nedunchezhan that Vartihan had unearthed a huge bounty from the bowels of the earth, which he had hidden in his house. The ruler peremptorily imprisoned Vartihan without conducting proper enquiry. Karthiga, the wife of the incarcerated Brahmin lamented before the Goddess in a pitiable tone. Kali, the Guardian Deity of the town forthwith closed the portals of Her temple on Her own accord. Realising the magnitude of his error, the Pandya not only ordered the release of Parasara but also bestowed upon him two prosperous towns named Vayalur and Tiruthangal. This account reveals the significant status enjoyed by Tiruthangal as early as the second century A.D.

KRISHNAPURAM

SRI VENKATACHALAPATHY TEMPLE

Towards the fag end of the reign of Krishnadeva Raya, Nagama Nayakar one of his lieutenants unfurled the banner of revolt in the Deccan. Krishnadevaraya commissioned Vishwanatha Nayakar, the son of Nagama Nayakar to quell the rebellion. Unruffled Vishwanatha brought the rebels to their knees and even placed his father in fetters. As a reward for his faithful services the governorship of the South was conferred upon him. This was the beginning of the Nayak dynasty who had their headquarters at Madurai. Although the Nayak politics was marred by political convulsions and internal dissensions their rulers continued the tradition of giving fillip to cultural activities. The architectural tradition of the Pandyas and of the Vijayanagar rulers was faithfully followed. Older temples were enlarged by providing additional parts. Additional prakaras were created by means of concentric outer enclosure walls, each wall having four gopurams at the cardinal points. Important adjuncts to the temple like the hall of-1000- pillars or spacious tanks were created. A tendency to multiply the number of pillars whenever possible gained momentum. Most of them were adorned by life-size statues of deities and donors. The massive Temples of Madurai, Rameswaram, Tirunelveli, and Srirangam were enlarged with mantaps and towers. Sculptures adorning the pillars of the temples found at Perur, Thadicombu, Nanguneri, Thirukurungudi, Kalakkad, and SriVaikuntam bear ample testimony to the artistic skill and the intellectual acumen of the sculptors of the Nayak regime. A typical example of Nayak sculpture is furnished by the Sri Venkatachalapathy Temple of Krishnapuram. This tiny village is located at a distance of about 10- kilometres from Tirunelveli on the high way leading to

Tiruchendur. It stands out as a treasure-house of images and idols of rare artistic beauty. The edifices and pillars bearing dextrously carved out sculptures are objects of marvel attracting a large number of visitors. Scenes from history and mythology have been brought out in bas-relief in a manner which is at once telling and exquisite.

The Temple occupying an area of 18 acres and 0.04 cents is located at a distance of two furlongs from the high way. A glorious five-tiered gopuram (18 cms x 22 cms) surmounted by five kalasams perched over the eastern gateway lures the visitor to the temple. Miniature sculptures of Mahavishnu, Adishesha, Narasimha, Trivikrama and Subramanya mounted on a peacock grace the panels.

The temple comprises of three prakaras, divided by three sturdy walls. The outer wall was dismantled by Khan Sahib at the instance of the Nawab of Arcot. Its stones were utilised in the construction of a mammoth fort at Palayamkottai which was named Pillaikkottai in honour of Khan Sahib who was popularly known as Pillai. The ruins of the outer walls are extant. They even now bear ample testimony to the vandalism.

The temple could boast of a multitude of mantaps of varying proportions like the Pandal mantap, Vahana mantap, Ranga mantap, and Nanguneri Jeeyar mantap, besides the ardha mantap and the sanctum sanctorum. The Pandal Mantap, situated in front of the tower contains pillars which possess artistic components like pushpabodikai, palagai and varikolam. The Unjal Mantap is designed for stationing the utsavars after their ceremonial bath at the Teppakulam. The square shaped Vasantha Mantap is designed in the Navrang style.

The south eastern corner of the first prakara accommodates the Nanguneri Jeeyar mantap. Here the Jeeyar Swamigal used to sojourn during his return journey from Alwar Tirunagari. The pillared hall is adorned by numerous female figures holding lamps in their hands which is a typical feature of the temples of Kerala. The copper plated image of Garudalwar has found a place in the Yagasalai Mantap. On its western side, the Swargavasal is situated. The manimantap supported by numerous pillars adorned by the figures of elephant and Yali, contains a huge bell.

In a centrally located sanctum sanctorum, Venkatachalapathy, the presiding deity blesses the devotees in a standing pose in the august company of Sri devi, and Bhudevi. The idol, made of granite is about four feet tall. Two of his arms grasp the conch and the disc. The other two arms offer the Abhayamudra and the Kadahasta. Srinivasa Perumal, the utsavar possesses identical iconographic features. Mounted on a padmapita, he wears the Tiruman mark on his forehead: a dazzling sword is tied round his waist. Karandamakuta, Maharakuntala, Udharabhandha, and Katibhandha lend grandeur to her person. Sridevi, mounted on a padmapita reveals a Tribhangi pose holding a lotus bud in her left hand while her right hand presents a lolahasta posture. Her head is crowned by karandamakuta: her person is embellished by multifarious ornaments. Bhudevi also possesses identical features. But her left hand is held in lolahasta pose while her right hand grips the lotus. Three Ubhayanachiars are also housed nearby. An ekatala vimana with bronze finial shaped like an inverted lotus crowns the sanctum sanctorum. Stucco images like that of Garudalwar lend charm to the vimana. The griva is beautified by similar sculptures of Gajalakshmi, Narasimha and Brahma seated on a lotus flower.

A sanctum situated at the end of the outer prakaram contains the idols of Alamelumangai Thayar, both as Moolavar and Utsavar. Wearing a charming makuta, she presents the abhaya and varada mudras. The mahamantap of this shrine is adorned by floral designs and miniature sculptures like that of a dancing monkey. In another shrine located at the other end, the four-armed Varamangai Thayar gives darshan with her seat on the padmapita. Senai Mudaliyar or Vishvaksena with a karanda makuta crowning his head and his hand brandishing a mace occupies another shrine. Navaneetha Krishna, Andal, Garudalwar, Sudarshana and Kothandarama are also housed in the interior parts of the temple. The Alwars both as Moolavars and Utsavars have a separate shrine.

The ingenious carvings and the magnificent images which have won the approbation of art lovers are treasured in the two mantaps-the Ranga Mantap and the Veerappa Nayakan mantap. The enchanted viewer is amazed by their dextrous workmanship and wonders whether they are the creation of Heavenly celestials.

The Veerappa Nayakan mantap contains six monolithic columns and 8 artistic pillars in two rows. The neatly chiselled elephants carved out on either side of the flight of steps are exemplary. The elephant on the right side enjoys playing with the mahout while that on the left rescues a girl from a snake. The pillar near the entrance has an elegantly portrayed image of Arjuna, endowed with a long and flowing beard and acuminate nails. Having performed an arduous penance he had appeased Lord Pasupathi. As a reward the irresistible Pasupatha astra was granted to him. He is represented as standing on a chariot as through he is ready to face the adversaries in battle.

The majestic Karna occupies the opposite pillar, armed with the destructive Nagasta. An expression of indignation is discernible on his face. A monkey seems to play some pranks upon the shoulders of an acrobat. A comely damsel dances with a parrot on her shoulders. The sculptures depicting a gypsy's encounter with the soldiers is exquisite. The gypsy seems to abduct the princess, armed with a bow and arrows, with the soldiers following closely in their heels. The drapery of the princess floats in the air. An equestrian had thrust his lance upon the shoulders of the gypsy while another soldier charges upon him with a raised sword in his hands. The blood oozing out of the wound on the left side is denoted in a red shade of stone. The whole frame of the gypsy is twisted as a result of the excruciating pain which is clearly discernible on his face. Even the ribs, bones and nerves of the kuravan are prominently etched. The princess reveals a sigh of relief at the attempts made to rescue her from the clutches of the kuravan.

Another sculpture portrays a kurathi who strives to kidnap a prince. A woman, probably the foster mother of the prince pursues them on an aquatic bird, probably a swan. The king comes in search of his son. While an equestrian chases with a sword in his hand, an apprehensive mother consults a sooth-sayer about the fate of the prince. A gypsy woman dances to the tune of a folk singer wearing abundant ornaments and a garland of lotus, on another pillar. Yet another pillar depicts an apsara woman bedecked with opulent ornaments and holding a lotus bud in one hand and a pomegranate in the other. Her hair style is well designed. She dances with these objects intact. Sculptures of a hunter armed with bow and arrows, an amorous couple and panel sculptures describing puranic episodes are also worthy of admiration. Numerous bas-reliefs narrating puranic themes like Rama pursuing the deer, Sugriva coming to grips

with Vali, Narasimha's monomachy with Hiranyakasipu and Mahavishnu in his multifarious forms are also commendable.

The Ranga Mantap found adjacent to the Veerappa Nayaken Mantap is graced by numerous Yali figures of different sizes occupying four of the pillars. A yali has a rolling stone in its mouth which cannot be taken out. Bas-reliefs narrating themes like Kolattam, Hanuman carrying Sanjeevi hills, flying Garuda and Kaliyamardhana add charm to the mantap. On the top of the pillar, a remarkable carving combining a bull and an elephant is bound to enthrall the visitor. By a clever and adroit arrangement the eyes of the two animals are common, the lip of the elephant corresponds to the ear of the bull and the lifted trunk of the elephant serves as the bull's hump. One could never fail to applaud the brain of the artist for this masterly creation. A similar specimen combines a mother and a child deftly.

Fourteen artistically carved pillars, seven on the northern side and seven on the southern side offer a feast of splendid workmanship to the connoisseur of art. The mammoth life-like image of Virabhadra could as well be ranked among the best specimens of Nayak art. He presents a warlike appearance with a sword in his right hand and shield in his left. An artistic karnada makuta crowns his head; sturdy anklets, keyuras, garland of skulls and astonishing assortment of ornaments lend grandeur to his person. A long hanging moustache, protruding teeth and big bulging eyes could strike terror into the hearts of the onlookers. His countenance reveals wrathfulness. He is surrounded by a few attendants, one of whom wears a Jatamakuta decorated in three layers; another plays upon a musical instrument resembling a fiddle; one of them has a twisted moustache. Even the ribs and the bones of these figures are delicately brought out.

The locals have narrated a scintillating incident revolving round Virabhadra. One day the archaka of the temple had locked the temple having left his child inadvertently in the mantap. Later on he came to secure the child. Virabhadra assured the archaka that he would safe guard the child till dawn. The archaka did not heed to his pledge. In a fit of fury Virabhadra tore the child to pieces. The grief-stricken archaka clipped off the nails of Virabhadra's fingers. From that day onwards Virabhadra ceased to be an Ugraswaroopi and became mollified.

Manmatha, the Cupid of Indian tradition presents himself wearing a karnanda makuta on his head. His hands grasp the bow of sugarcane and arrows of the choicest flowers. Two female attendants, one of whom bears a bouquet in her hands and the other in possession of an umbrella, serve him efficiently. His consort Rathidevi occupies the opposite pillar seated on an elegant-looking swan. Her hands are adorned by a mirror and a lotus flower. A sharp nose enables her to wear a neat pair of studs. She is provided with a thali, befitting her status as a sumangali. The Puranas are replete with incidents revolving round Manmatha's encounter with Lord Shiva. When Lord Shiva rendered Kamadeva. to ashes, his consort Rathidevi begged the Lord to resuscitate her charred husband. Lord Shiva decreed that Manmatha would be visible in his resplendent form to Rathidevi alone, thereby confirming her sumangali status. Beneath the pillar female attendants of Rathi are portrayed in a dancing posture.

The travails of a damsel who wins the hand of the man of her choice (a sage) is elegantly sculptured on a pillar. A sagacious sage sits on the banks of a river steeped in meditation, A damsel of betwitching charm visits the ashram. She is enamoured of his spiritual prowess and captivating grace.

Although the hermit condescends to the offer he desires to test her sincerity. By his divine powers he assumes an ugly form with hideous and loathsome features. The damsel is unperturbed by this transformation. She affirms her choice by indicating her index finger. The sculpture depicts the damsel with ostentatious ornaments and a narrow pair of eyes. The sage wears a simple and inornate upper garments and a dhoti.

Bheema's adventure involving the Purushamriga is cast pulchritudinously in two pillars. Tradition gives an absorbing account of this incident. The Pandavas during their Aranyavasa planned to perform a yajna for which they required the milk of Purushamriga, a quaint-looking creature combining the features of a man and a lion. It's upper half is human while the lower part is leonine. The Purushamriga was a Saivite zealot who detested the Vaishnavites. Bheema boasted that he could secure its milk. Krishna decided to blunt his pride and reveal to Purushamriga the oneness of Shiva and Vishnu. Accordingly Bheema was deputed on the mission of securing milk from Purushamriga armed with twelve sivalingas. He was instructed to chant the name of Govinda in front of Purushamriga. Accordingly Bheema repaired to the abode of Purushamriga where the latter was engrossed in a penance invoking the name of Lord Shiva. He chanted the name of Govinda. Purushamriga had its territory clearly marked with boundaries. It was resolved to imprison any devotee of Mahavishnu who entered his territory. However if the victims moved out of his territory the Purushamriga would release him. Purushamriga caught Bheema and gripped him firmly. Bheema immediatly placed the first of the Sivalingas on the ground. Purushamriga immediatly released his grip to propitiate the Lord. Bheema's venture to secure Purushamriga's milk, second time met with the same result. The same tale was repeated twelve times. On the twelfth

occasion Lord Shiva manifested himself in the form of Sankaranarayana thus proving the oneness of Shiva and Mahavishnu to Purushamriga. Bheema had exhausted his stock of Sivalingas and was easily snared up by Purushamriga . Bheema's endeavours to extricate himself by the use of his muscles were of no avail. The crest -fallen warrior argued that he had crossed the territory of Purushamriga and sought his release. The Purushamriga did not consent. The case was taken to Yudhishtira(Dharma Incarnate) who would deliver his judgement impartially without fear or favour. Yudhishtira decreed that a part of Bheema's person lay within the territory of Purushamriga and hence the latter had full control over Bheema. Purushamriga was greatly appeased by Yudhishtira's dispassionate and equitable judgement. He released Bheema from his clutches. This incident is partially borne out by the sculptures occupying two of the pillars. The places where Bheema dropped the twelve lingas are revered as the twelve Siva temples of Kanyakumari district.

The granite stones utilised in the construction of the temple were scooped out of rocks, located about 2 1/2 kms away from the temple. The original stones from out of which the carvings have been wrought emit melodious sounds when struck. The Teppakulam located at a distance of two furlongs from the temple is beautified by the Theerthavari mantap. A neatly chiselled flight of steps enables the devotees to have a dip in the tank. Even a nandavanam existed near the tank long back.

Epigraphic India (vol. ix 1916) credits Krishnappa Nayakar, (1563-72), the son and the successor of Vishwanatha Nayakar (the founder of the dynasty) with the construction of the prakara and a tower soaring as high as mount Mandeka over the eastern entrance. The - 5- copper plate grants issued by Sadasiva Raya of Vijayanagar at the instance of Krishnappa

Nayakar are in Sanskrit. It was proclaimed on a Monday (Amavasya day) in the month of Thai in 1567 at the Sri Rangam Temple. Krishnappa Nayakar is lauded for the completion of the temple complex with prakaras, gopuram and Ranga mantap. He also laid broad streets on all the four sides to facilitate the movement of the temple car. The villages of Ariyakulam, Kodikulam, Kuthukaval', Puthaneri, (Tiruvenkatanallur), Pottakulam, Sri Ramakulam and Alikudi were granted as endowments for the performance of daily poojas and rituals punctiliously.

It also provides for laying out flower gardens and for the burning of perpetual lamps and incense. Adequate arrangements were also made for the celebration of the teppotsavam during the annual Brahmotsavam. The capacious tank was filled with the waters of Vallanadu. An agraharam comprising of 108-houses was created to house Brahmins, well-versed in the Vedas and the Agamas. The concluding portion of the grant contains the name of Virupaksha, the presiding deity of Vijayanagar.

From a study of the grants we learn that poojas were performed five times a day adhering meticulously to the canons laid down in the agamas. It was accompanied by deeparadhana, Naivaithiyam, and music. The brahmotsavam was organised on a grandiose scale, spanning a period of -11- days. Now it is not conducted.

Deivachillayar alias Mayilerum perumal, the son-in-law of Dalavai Ariyanatha Mudaliyar (the minister of Vishwanatha Nayakar) played a prominent role in the construction of the temple and the provision of endowments. A literary work called 'Deivachillayar vidu thoodu', penned by one Kumaraswamy Avadaniyar has greatly extolled the contributions of Deivachillayar to the temple. Caldwell (History of Tinnevely)

has given due credit to Deivachillayar for this role. Veerappa Nayakar, the son and successor of Krishnappa Nayakar constructed the mantap bearing his name and embellished it with mammoth life-like sculptures. The village was originally known as Thiruvencatapuram probably after the presiding deity. It was rechristened as Krishnapuram by Krishnappa Nayakar.

This temple was previously treated as a sub temple of the Ramaswamy Temple of Palayamkottai. In 1973 it was brought under the jurisdiction of the Nelliappar temple of Tirunelveli. In 1976 railings were placed before the statues at a cost of Rs. 2000/-

A master plan for the renovation of the temple at a cost of Rs. 3/-lakhs was submitted. In 1986 the administration of the temple passed on to the Tiruchendur Devasthanam. The temple received a facelift prior to the visit of our former primeminister Mr. Rajiv Gandhiji a few years back. Plans have been devised for the repairation of the thoranavayil. Kumbhabishekkham will be performed after the completion of these works.

The temple owns 40.02 acres of wet lands and 8.51 acres of dry lands. Wooden vahanas like Garuda, Hanuman, elephant, horse, lion, and the punnai tree, are extant . Poojas are performed twice a day. Saturdays especially in the month of Purattasi are regarded auspicious days for worshipping the deity. Attempts should be made to draw more tourists to this treasure-house of sculpture.

SRIVAIKUNTAM KALLAPIRANSWAMY TEMPLE:

A considerable portion of South Tamil Nadu is well served by the Tamraparani river. Also known as Porunai, this sacred river has found an enviable place in the ancient literature of Tamil Nadu. On the banks of this divine river are found nine hallowed Vaishnav centres popularly known as 'Nava Tirupathis'. Nammalwar, one of the most eminent devotees that the Vaishnav world has ever produced, has sanctified all these holy centres in hymns. Among them Srivaikuntam, Varagunamangai (Natham), Tirupulingudi, Tholaivilimangalam, or Rettai Tirupathi (the twin Tirupathis) and Thirukulandai (Perunkulam) are situated on the northern bank of Tamraparani. Alwar Tirunagari, Thenthiruperai and Tirukolur are located on the southern bank of the same river. All the nine centres are included in the newly formed Chidambaranar district. Renowned for its splendid architecture and captivating images, the Kallapiranswamy temple at Srivaikuntam possesses several distinctive features among the Navathirupathis. In prominence and public esteem it is only second to Alwar Thirunagari, the birth place of Nammalwar. Lying on the Tirunelveli-Tiruchendur high way, it is well served by buses from Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, and Tiruchendur. Besides it has a Railway station at a distance of about 2 kilometres from the town.

Somuka, an iniquitous demon had the audacity to dispossess Brahma of the four Vedas. Brahma found himself debile and helpless in the face of the invincible demon. He repaired to Vaikuntavana which was located on the banks of Tamraparani and performed an inexorable and austere penance. Moved by the severe penance, Mahavishnu gave darshan to Brahma and

promised to retrieve the Vedas. Accordingly Vishnu overwhelmed Somuka and restored the Vedas to their original place. He also assented to reside at Vaikuntavana as 'Vaikuntanatha.

The image of Vaikuntanatha had no patrons. In due course of time the shrine and the image lay buried in the earth. This area passed under the hegemony of the Pandya rulers who had their capital at Manapadai. VaikuntaVana served as the grazing ground for the cattle. Among the herd, one particular cow used to move to the spot where Vaikuntanatha lay buried and pour forth milk. The king was displeased to find that this cow alone did not yield any milk. Suspecting some foul play on the part of the cowherds, he sent his officials to watch the movements of the cow. The officials were non plussed by the act of the cow and informed the ruler accordingly. The ruler sensing the presence of some divine element, dug the spot with utmost veneration. The presence of Vaikuntanatha made him exhilarant. The idol was reinstated in its shrine and a lovely temple was constructed at that spot. From that day onwards it became a regular habit to anoint the deity with milk. The deity came to be known as 'Palpandian' (Pal-Milk) . At a later date this region was infested by a gang of maruders. Their head was one Kaladushana, a Robinhood-reincarnate. It was his avowed principle to denude the affluent of their ill-gotten wealth. One half of the booty thus acquired would be proffered to Vaikuntanatha. After meeting the essential requirements of the bandits, the remnants of the wealth could be distributed among the poor and the down trodden. These acts of charity had made him the darling of the poor. The forces of the Pandyaruler made a marathon endeavour to bring him to book, but in vain. However they succeeded in nabbing the other members of the

gang . Kaladushana, hounded from pillar to post sought asylum at the hands of Vaikuntanatha.

Mahavishnu, masquerading as Kaladushana surrendered himself, before the ruler. Later Vishnu appeared in his divine form and informed the ruler that he had created Kaladushana only to teach the world the following facts. "Large accumulation of ill-gotten wealth and possession of wealth without utilising it for charitable purposes would result in ultimate loss". The ruler was greatly enlightened by these words. He built a huge temple to accommodate the Lord. The Lord came to be known as 'Kallapiran'

The temple with its lofty tower perched over the eastern entrance and massive walls is regarded a Vaikunta on earth. The nine-tiered tower soaring to a height of 110 feet is one of the tallest among the towers of the Vaishnav temples. It is adorned by rare sculptures, some of which are partly mutilated. The temple occupies an area of 5 acres and is encompassed by massive walls 580' long and 396' broad.

The sanctum sanctorum houses Sri Vaikuntanatha who gives 'Ekantha seva' in a standing pose. One of his hands holds a huge mace. Anantha (Adisesha) is seen nearby in a state of reverence, holding a parasol over his head. As at Sri Rangan, Sridevi and Bhudevi are conspicuous by their absence. The image of the deity is made of salagrama and is anointed with milk, there by justifying the title Pal Pandian. Though the sanctum is located far interior, the golden rays of the sun fall on the august person of the Lord once during Uthrayana (in the month of Chithrai., (April- May) and once during Dakshinayana (in the month of Aippasi- October- November) among the towers of the Vaissnav Temple.

Special poojas are instituted to celebrate the occurrence of this rare phenomenon. The sanctum is embellished by the Chandra Vimana located over it. A stupa of gold is installed at the top of the Vimana.

The Ardhmandapa houses the idol of the utsavar known as 'Kallapiran' or 'Choranatha' (Lord of the thieves) Bedecked with an extravagant gold kavacha and holding a mace in his hand, he is stationed on a chapparam. He is flanked on either side by Sridevi and Bhudevi. The sculptor, carried to the height of ecstasy by the exquisite charm of the idol, caressed its cheeks with his hands. It is believed that the Lord bears marks of the sculptor's fingers even today. At the entrance of the Ardhmandapa are seen two dwarapalakas of enchanting beauty.

The figures of the two Thayars- Vaikunta Nayaki and Choranatha Nayaki are housed in two separate sanctums facing each other. The idols are made of salagrama. There are separate shrines for Senai Mudaliyar, Gurudalwar, Venugopala, Manavalamuni and Yoga Narasimha. In the shrine of Yoga Narasimha, the Utsava vigraha of Lakshmi Narasimhar has found a place. Special worship is instituted in this shrine on Tuesdays. Ten lovely images depicting the dasavathars of Mahavishnu are kept in another shrine.

The temple with its multitude of prakaras and mantaps presents an imposing sight. In all there are five prakaras including the Nachiar prakara and the Nandavana prakara. A number of mantaps like the mahamantap and the Swarga mantap were added subsequently.

Thiruvenkatamudaiyan mantap located near the main gopuram and facing south is a treasure-house of architecture. It contains the shrine of Thiruvenkatamudaiyan (Venkatesa, the

Lord of Tirumala). It was built by Vadamalayappa Pillai, an official of the Nayak ruler of Madurai. Figures of Yali, lion and elephant, of Devas and devotees adorn the pillars of this mantap, some which are even 5' wide. Delicate figures of Bhikshadana, Venugopala, Madanagopala, Govardhanagiridhari, Nammalwar, Manmatha and Rathi, hunter, etc can be seen in various parts of this mantapa. A glimpse of Anjaneya in different forms can be seen on the pillars of the mantap.

Certain well-chiselled, life-size figures embellish the pillars of this Mantap. The awe-inspiring Agora Veerabhadra and the fearless soldiers holding weapons of substantial size like the bow deserve the attention of the visitor. However, the sculptures depicting the characters of the Ramayana are the best of the lot. Rama is depicted with a bow in his left hand: his right hand embraces Sugreeva affectionately for the meritorious services rendered by him. Lakshmana is seen embracing Anjaneya with a good amount of endearment. They are watched gracefully by Sita and Vibhishana. Rama and his attendants seem to wear the Tenkalai mark on their forehead. The exquisite beauty of these sculptures seems to beggar description.

The pillars of the Dwajasthamba Mantap bear refined architectural features. The animal world too is given due representation in the sculptures. The Tirumozhi Mantap contains excellent portrayals of monkeys, squirrels and parrots. A monkey is depicted as holding a feather; a parrot seems to feed its baby; a parrot and a squirrel are shown consuming their food. The sculpture of a snake-charmer taming a snake can be seen near the Paramapatha entrance; the scene is watched with awe by three monkeys. The outer wall of the Manavala Muni shrine contains the sculpture of a dancing nomad; he is accompanied

by his consort. Thus various types of sculptures are accommodated at different parts of the temple. The corridor inside the temple contains handsome paintings depicting the -108- sacred kshetras of the Vaishnavites. The scene of Rama's Pattabishekham and the episodes from the Bhagavatha have taken the form of paintings which fascinate the eye.

Two sacred theerthas referred to as Brighu Theertha and Kalasa Theertha are found near the temple. Besides a huge Teppakulam is situated along the bank of Tamraparani river. It is here that the Teppotsavam is celebrated on a grandiose scale in January or February.

Valuable information is furnished by a series of epigraphs, six in number, incised in elegant letters in various parts of the temple and deciphered by the Archaeological Department.

An inscription of a ruler called Konerinmaikondan records a gift of 5 velis of land as tax free gift to the temple. A ruler who had defeated the Cheras gave a gift for the creation and maintenance of a garden in the temple of Vaikuntanatha. A similar gift was made by the Pandya ruler Jatavarman Kulasekhara. In the reign of Sundara Pandya Thevar who subjugated the Chola Kingdom, a gift was made for lighting a perpetual lamp in the evening. Another epigraph alludes to the installation of the icon of VAIKUNTAVALI Nachiar and to the grants made in its favour. Virapandya Thevar, a Pandya ruler who ruled over the Tirunelveli region donated a tract of land for a special pooja performed on the occasion of his birthday in the month of Vaikasi.

The temple served as an impregnable fortress for the British when they were pitted in a war with Veerapandya Kattabomman and his allies in 1801. It is stated that the battle

marks were visible on the door of the temple till recently. A number of eminent patrons have contributed their mite to the amelioration of the temple. Vadamalayappa Pillai, an official of the Madurai Nayak ruler had arranged for the installation of the Dasavathara images and for the construction of the Tiruvenkatamudayan mantapam besides making munificent grants of ornaments for the Gods and the Goddesses. Similar services have been executed by magnanimous persons like Pillai Perumal, Ellarkum Nallan and Chockalingam. A wooden ratha replete with minute sculptures was constructed at the instance of Mr. Paramasivan Pillai (Kasi Pillai). Unfortunately, the car festival is not being conducted now. The pillars of the Athyayana Utsava mantap contain images of persons who were probably associated with the temple.

Sri Vaikuntam has given a fillip to the growth of religious literature. Brahmanda Purana which occupies a prominent place among the eighteen puranas created by Vedavyasa, contains a chapter called Navathirupathi Mahatmeeyam. The first part of this chapter is devoted to Srivaikuntam. Vaikunta Manmeeyam forms a part of Tamraparani Sthala Purana which is still in the form of palm manuscript. These two works are in Sanskrit.

Nammalwar while dedicating a decad to the Lord of Tirupulingudi makes a passing reference to Sri Vaikuntam. These hymns are included in his Tiruvoimozhi. Modern age witnessed the efflorescence of a new form of literature classified as 'Prabhanta'. This type of literature was mostly devoted to religious themes. In the past two centuries, works like Vaikuntanatha Pillai Thamizh, Vaikuntanatha Thalattu, Vaikuntanatha Tiruppanimalai and Srivaikuntam Ammanai were created lauding the qualities of the Lord of Sri Vaikuntam. A

song contained in - 108 - Tirupathi Anthathi, composed by Divya Kavi Pillai Perumal Aiyangar describes the plight of a maiden who was enamoured of Vaikuntanatha.

Poojas are performed six times a day in conformity with the principles laid down in the Pancharathra Agama by Bhattachariars. The annual Brahmotsavam is conducted in the month of Chithrai (April - May) for ten days on a grand scale at a cost of about Rs. 7000/-. Besides the Pavithrotsavam conducted in Avani (August-September) for five days, Navarathri held for ten days in October - November, the Athyayana Utsavam conducted in December - January, and the Unjal Utsavam deserve special mention. All the monthly festivals and other auspicious occasions are also observed. The temple owns about twelve vahanas including Garuda, Sesha, Horse, Lion, Elephant and Hanuman. Five of them are gold plated while three others are plated with silver. The temple was managed previously by the Devasthanam Committee of the Tuticorin circle. In 1939, it passed under the control of the Executive Officer of the Hindu Religious Endowments Board.

This centre, which is held in high esteem by the Vaishnavites is also a hallowed spot for the Saivites. Like the Navathirupathis, the Navakailasams are also located on the banks of Tamraparani. They are Papanasam, Ariyanayakipuram, Cherkadevi, Tirunelveli, Murappanadu, Sri Vaikuntam, Thenthiruperaai, Rajapathy and Serndapoomangalam. The Presiding Deity in all these nine temples is known as Kailasanatha. Sage Romasa is believed to have worshipped the Nava Kailasanathas.

The Kailasanatha temple of Srivaikuntam is located at a distance of one kilometre from the Vaikuntanatha temple. Kailasanatha, the Presiding deity is a swayambu linga. The

divine consort is named Sivagami. The Sandana Sabapathy mantap, like other mantaps contains elegant pillars and artistic sculptures. A neatly chiselled Vimana, erected over the sanctum adorns the temple. Chandrakula Pandya, the ruler of Madurai is credited with the construction of the sanctums and the Mantaps. Veerappa Nayak (1609-23) embellished the temple by adding the Yagasala, the dwajasthamba and Sandana Sabapathy Mantaps.

Poojas are conducted six times a day. The temple owns a few acres of cultivable land in and around Sri Vaikuntam. The ten day festival conducted in April and the divine marriage festival of Sivagamasundari, held in October are largely attended. Thus, Srivaikuntam serves both as a 'Vaikunta' and as a 'Kailasa' on earth.

Kumaragurubarar, a literary luminary of the 18th century was born at Srivaikuntam. He was dumb by birth. By the grace of Lord Subramanya of Tiruchendur he blossomed into a divine poet at a very tender age. He has rendered many devotional poems in Tamil.

TIRUVATTAR

ADIKESAVA PERUMAL TEMPLE

Lord Brahma, urged by a yearning to have a darshan of Mahavishnu performed a penance. However he failed to heed punctiliously to the principles laid down in the Agamas. The outcome of this act of omission proved ominous. Out of the sacrificial fire pit emerged a demon of deleterious disposition called Kesa. His sister Kesi also accompanied him. They wanted prey to satiate their gargantuan appetite. Brahma granted them a free rein to travel throughout the length and the breadth of the Universe in search of food. They were also blessed with longevity of life. Fortified by this boon Kesa and Kesi went berserk subjecting the pious and the virtuous to misery. Unable to cope up with the atrocities perpetrated by the iniquitous demons, the devout sages prayed to Mahavishna to redeem the world from the clutches of the wicked. Mahavishnu left His Divine Abode in the company of Adisesha to subdue the demons. A fierce contest ensued as the Lord came to grips with Kesa. The pride of the demon was shattered as he lay prostrate on the ground, panting for breath. Mahavishnu ordained Adisesha to coil himself over the body of the Asura. He also resolved to lie eternally in a reclining position upon the serpent. Mahavishnu gives darshan to the devotees in the same posture today. It is believed that if Mahavishnu ventures to move from His position, Kesa would escape and wreak vengeance.

Kesi vowed to avenge the fate that befell her brother. She instigated River Tamraparni to inundate the whole land. The tides of the river engulfed the whole land and threatened to immerse it. Thereupon the Lord directed Bhudevi to raise the level of the land. The marathon manoeuvres of the river ended in a fiasco. Humbled and crest fallen, Tamraparni offered her

salutations to the Lord and went round His Abode. Watching from a distance the river presented the sight of a garland submitted at the feet of Mahavishnu as a token of servitude. The place where the river went round the Abode of the Lord is known as Tiruvattar (Vattam: Circle). The place where Tamraparni bisected itself into two branches to enable it to go round in a circle is called 'Moonattu Mugam' and 'Kothai Pirali'.

Situated on a high platform in a spacious compound of 1 1/2 acres and surrounded by massive and sturdy walls raising to a height of 30 feet, the temple presents a grand spectacle. Surrounded on all the three sides by the river Tamraparni and its tributaries, the Kothayar and the Paraliyar, the temple is set in sylvan surroundings. On the western side is found the sacred Ramahat or Thrippadathukadavu. A dip in this sacred theertha is regarded as a panacea for all ailments. It could even absolve the devotee of heinous sins like Brahmahathi (murder of a Brahmin).

The Presiding Deity faces west which is a rare phenomenon in Vaishnavite temples. However, the devotees enter the temple through the eastern entrance after climbing a flight of about 25 steps. A charming structure of tiles and wood is raised over the eastern and the western entrances. It is a typical specimen of the Kerala architecture and bears resemblance to the Dravidian Gopuram. On crossing the eastern entrance, one proceeds southwards for a darshan of Sri Boothanatha. A room found at the south west corner houses the idols of Adikesava, the Goddess and Venkatachalapathi. As one goes about circumambulating the outer prakara, he reaches the western entrance where the dwajasthamba is found. This flag staff made of copper was installed by Maharaja, Sri Moolam Tirunal of Travancore in 1895 A.D. (Malayala Era 1071). Passing through

the Sri Balikalpurai one enters the Nalambalam. No less than 224 granite pillars, each one of them carrying exquisite images of deepalakshmis, the traditional female lamp bearer, are found in the Mantap. The variations in the hair/style and drapery of the charming figures are amazing. In fact no two figures are alike. The presence of numerous maidens holding lamps in their hands is a unique feature found in the Keralite temples.

The Mukhamantap in front of the sanctum, also known as 'Ottakkal Mantap' is an engineering marvel. It was shaped out of a single block of granite three feet thick and measuring 17 1/2 feet by 25 ft. It is a rare feat and bears ample testimony to the engineering skill of the architects of the bygone days. The pillars of the Balipeeta Mantap are embellished by mammoth life-size images of Lakshmana, Indrajit, Venugopala, Nataraja and Parvathi. Figures of Brahma playing upon the Veena, Manmatha wielding the bow of sugarcane and arrows of the choicest flowers, Rathidevi positioned upon a swan and Mahavishnu holding musical instruments, cut in stone and seen on either side of the same mantap are also enchanting. The physical features and the facial expression of the images can better be seen than described. The Udayamarthanda Mantap is an architectural fantasy. The scene of Ganapathy's marriage-procession is carved intricately in wood. The Srikoil also possesses a few lovely carvings of wood. A cluster of chains connected to a rod and hanging at the top would catch the eye of even a casual visitor. It is carved out of a solitary piece of wood.

In the sanctum, the Presiding Deity is manifest as Adikesava as he reclines on Sesha. The image is exquisitely fashioned out of a curious combination of articles known as 'Katusarkara yogam' which should not be washed with water. The 18 feet long Deity is therefore not the recipient of the daily abhishekhas.

However, the festival idol is anointed regularly after which he is profusely clad in ornaments and flowers. This idol is found just below the breast of the Lord and is accompanied by Lakshmi Devi and Bhudevi. A full view of the Moolavar can be had through the three doors of the Sanctum Sanctorum. The first gate allows us a view of the face of the Lord; the body can be seen through the second gate; a darshan of the Tiruvadi can be had through the third gate. Adikesava Perumal has kept his left hand hanging down. A glimpse of the hood of the serpent-king which lies over the head of the Deity can also be had. A separate shrine found on the eastern side of the Sribalipura houses the image of Alambadi Krishna; Maragathavalli Thayar is also accommodated in a shrine.

A passing reference to this Kshetra, believed to have originated in the Threthayuga about 12000 years ago, is found in the Padmapurana. Purananuru, an anthology of the poetic outpourings of the erudite scholars of the Sangam Age, belonging to the first three centuries of the Christian Era, contains a reference to Vattar. Mangudi Kilar, the author of that poem speaks of Vattar which was enriched by streams. It was probably the capital of Eliniyathan, a feudatory chieftain of the Sangam epoch. The hallowed kshetra was known as 'Adidhama Sthalam' and 'Dakshina Vaikuntam'. It originated long before the Anantapadmanabaswamy Temple of Trivandrum, thereby earning the name 'Adi Anantam'. The Anantapadmanabaswamy temple is an exact replica of the Adikesava temple. However, Anantapadmanabha faces east while Adikesava has taken up a west-facing position. The Vimana surmounted over the Sanctum of Adikesava is called 'Ashtakshara-Vimana. Parasurama and Chandra have propitiated Adikesava and received his benefactions.

Tradition says that five sagacious sages under the able guidance of Vasishta had their ashrams at this sacred sthala till the advent of the Kaliyuga. At the dawn of the Kaliyuga they had entrusted the five ashrams-Munigal Madham, Panchanda Madham, Kanchi Madham, Ramana Madham and Marthanda Madham to Sri Vaishnavas of Tirupathi and the Madhathil Pillais. The temple was ably administered by the Sri Vaishnavas for a long time. Finally, the control of the temple passed on to the King of Travancore. The rulers of Travancore adopted a reverential attitude towards Adikesava Perumal and Anantapadmanaba whom they adored as their family Deities.

An inscription of Rajendra Chola I(1013-45) found in the Balikal Mantap alludes to the 'Supreme Being' who reclines on the Serpent at Tiruvattar. An inscription dated 1174 A.D. describes the munificent grants made by Udaya Marthanda Varma, the crown prince of Venad. In 1603 A.D., Vira Rama Varma Kulasekhara Perumal extended the area of the temple by constructing the Thirumalika, Thiru Madapalli (kitchen) and the Mukha Mantap.

Two inscriptions incised in 1604 A.D. inform us of the renovation activities in the reign of Viravi Ravi Varma who also constructed the Ottakal Mantap. His brother, Aditya Varma relaid the floor of the four Prakaras with stones. Rama Varma, a younger brother of Aditya Varma arranged for the installation of the two dwarapalakas.

Adikesava Perumal is credited with the performance of a number of miracles. In 1674, the Moslem vandals chose Tiruvattar as the target of their attack. Rani Umai Ammai Nachiar, the ruler of this area found herself unequal to the task of thwarting the irruptive forces. She sought succour from the great warrior-king Kerala Varma of Kottayam. Kerala Varma himself was pessimistic about his chances of victory. Climbing the

Mukhamantap of the Adikesava Temple, the king who was as scholarly as he was Achillian chanted fourteen verses invoking the Lord to crown his endeavour with success. These verses known as Bhakta Sangeerthanam are recited even today with a great deal of veneration by devotees. The ruler felt that a soldier clad in green armour had left the sanctum of the Lord. The Moslem army was attacked by hordes of wasps. Their commander was stung to death. The demoralised forces ran pell mell and the rout was complete.

In 1741 Marthanda Varma, the king of Travancore was engaged in a bitter struggle with the Dutch at Colachel. Before, embarking upon the venture, he placed his sword at the feet of Adikesava Perumal and sought his blessings. He emerged triumphant in the battle. Dilanoi, the Generalissimo of the Dutch forces became a captive in his hands. Dilanoi became an admirer of Marthanda Varma and was appointed the commander of the Travancore army.

In the eighteenth century, the temple was the target of the Moslem marauders. The army of the Nawab of Arcot desecrated the temple and denuded it of its ornaments. The charming idol of the Utsavar was also captured and stored in the lumber room alongwith the other articles. The idol used to appear on top everyday, pushing aside all the weights that were put on it. The perplexed Nawab had it chained, boring two holes on it pedestal. At that time the Begum of the Nawab was afflicted by a malady. She was unable to withstand the excruciating pain. The physicians could not fathom the nature of the mysterious stomach-ailment.

At this juncture, Adikesava Perumal appearing in the dream of the Azhathi or the bodyguard of the temple bade him to recover the festival idol. Explaining the greatness of the Lord, the Azhathi convinced the Nawab that the malady would be

cured once the festival idol was reverted to its original place. The Nawab complied with the request and was startled to find that his Begum was convalescent. The Nawab repented for his blasphemous deeds. As a token of gratitude he offered a pillow, a crown and a plate weighing 388 tolas of unalloyed gold. A special pooja called Thiru Allah Pooja is performed at the Yoga Mantap during the two annual Utsavams. The cap used on this occasion to crown the idol is fashioned like the Moslem head-dress. This pooja was instituted by the Nawab.

The Azhathi carrying the idol placed it alongside the Shiva Temple at a place called Thali and had a bath. On return he was dismayed to find that the idol was well entrenched and could not be moved. The maharaja came to know of this strange phenomenon. He decided to take the idol of Adikesava to Thali every year for performing an arat. Only after this decision was taken the idol could be moved. This incident is commemorated every year during the Aippasi festival performed at Thali.

Tiruvattar occupies a prominent place among the 108 Divya kshetras considered sacrosanct by the Vaishnavites. It ranks one among the -13- hallowed Vaishnav centres of Malanad(Kerala). Eleven devotional hymns composed by the mystic Nammalwar give a vivid account of the fertile and rich pilgrim centre. These songs form a part of Tiruvoimozhi which is hailed as one of the glorious devotional masterpieces produced in the world. Krishna Chaitanya(XI Century A.D.) was enamoured of the serene atmosphere that prevailed at Tiruvattar. His ecstatic feelings gave birth to an exemplary philosophic work known as Brahma Samhita. Sarvangatha Adityavarma, a scion of the ruling house of Travancore has composed two decads lauding the two deities-Adikesava and Anantapadmanaba. Pillai Perumal Aiyangar's -108- Tirupathi Anthathi contains a poem on the Lord of Tiruvattar.

The daily rituals are performed in accordance with the Kerala tantric principles by Malayalee Brahmins. The rulers of Travancore bestowed a great deal of solicitude in the affairs of the temple. The heads of the two prominent Namboodri families- Manalikkara Madham and Athyar Madham-performed the functions of the Chief Tantris of the temple. They participated and coordinated the conduct of the caremonies, festivals and special poojas. The head priest or the Peria Nambi of Tiruvattar was nominated by the Maharaja himself. He had to hold the tenure for three years during which he was not authorised to leave the premises of the temple or to see his family. He was empowered to choose his assistants to perform the subsidiary functions. Four poojas—Usha Pooja, Ehirtha Pooja, Ucha Pooja and Athazha Pooja were performed regularly. Three additional Poojas instituted by the rulers. Udayamarthanda, Eravivarma and Adityavarma and bearing their names were performed alongwith the Ethirtha Pooja.

Two ten day festivals were conducted on a grand scale in October and April. During the former the arat or the holy immersion took place near the Siva temple at Thali and during the latter, it took place at Moonattumukham, two miles west of the temple at the confluence of Tamraparni and Kothayar. The festival idol mounted on the golden Garuda Vahana was taken in a magnificent procession. In addition festivals like Ashtami Rohini (Krishna Jayanthi) Vaikunta Ekadasi, Kalabham (January-February), the two Sri Balis (January-February) and July-August), Tiruvonam and Perunthamrithu Pooja in July/August and January-February, were well organised. The Tiruvonam festival was of special significance. The Maharaja of Travancore used to provide a silk cloth measuring 24 cubits in length. This silk cloth would grace the person of the Main Deity for one year till it was changed on the next Tiruvonam

day. On the same day a carpenter used to submit a set of bow and arrows to the Maharaja. Observing stipulated austerities for three days, the carpenter shapes the weapons, carries them in silence and solemnity, places them at a particular place and returns without turning back. Next day the steward hands over the weapons to the Maharaja.

The Perunthamrithu Pooja, conducted on the eve of the Uthrayanam and Dakshinayanam included a stately feast offered to Adikesava Perumal with all the traditional delicacies of sweets and puddings. The attending devotees were fed sumptuously within the precincts of the temple. The head-priest of the Trivandrum temple used to conduct Pushpanjali (offerings of flowers) at Tiruvattar.

The temple is now under the control of the Hindu Religious endowments Department of Tamilnadu. Tiruvattar is a small but significant town lying on the Thoduvetti-Kulasekharam road and is well connected by bus service with other parts of the district. The temple lies in a calm and isolated part of the town, shorn of its ancient grandeur, and seems to wait eagerly for a revival of its heydays. However, it still remains a rendezvous for the true devotees who pour in large number seeking solace. It still maintains the old traditions. Male members are forbidden to enter the temple wearing pants or trousers; they are required to wear dhotis. Lord Mahadeva who was a witness to the stubborn contest between Mahavishnu and Kesa positioned himself in the form of linga in twelve Sivalayas located around Kalkulam. Mahasivarathri festival is organised on a grand scale in all these temples. On that day devotees clad in saffron robes used to circumambulate the prakara of the twelve Siva temples chanting the name of Govinda which is a curious practice

**RAJAGOPURAM
KODAL ALAGAR TEMPLE
MADURAI**

